Cheat. Lie. Reject. Steal. Ridicule. Belittle. Betray. These are just a few of a very long list of ways in which we human beings do harm to one another. Jesus knows the whole list; it's not anything we could hide from him even if we tried. In fact, Jesus came into this world to address every item on that list and to add one more: Forgive. Forgive. Depending on where we are on the forgiveness spectrum, the word can evoke any number of emotions. Joy at being forgiven. Ambivalence about wanting to forgive. Disappointment at not receiving the forgiveness we desire. Sadness at not being able to forgive another. Jesus knows about all those emotions, too, and still he asks us, commands us even, to forgive one another.

In the gospel lessons for the last several weeks, Jesus comes off looking like a stern taskmaster as he gives his disciples their discipleship owner's manual. Love your neighbor. Strive for reconciliation when someone is separated from the community. Forgive. These rules for Christian life are kind of tough to take, especially given the fact that many of the people the disciples come into contact with don't seem to care about Jesus or his commandments. Peter is having a bit of trouble with the idea of forgiveness, so he speaks up. Peter and the other disciples are good Jews. The know that rabbinic law calls for a person who has been wronged to forgive the other person three times. Peter knows that Jesus likes to carry things to extremes, so he goes out on a limb. If Jewish law says you have to forgive someone who has sinned against you three times, what would Jesus say? How about seven times? That is more than twice what the law requires, but still not enough for Jesus. “Not seven times,” Jesus says. “You should forgive another 77 times.” Some scholars take it even further and translate Jesus' words as “seventy TIMES seven.”

What's going on here? Doesn't Jesus know how painful it is to be betrayed by another? Doesn't he understand that another person's words or actions can cut a person to the bone? Seventy seven or seventy times seven, either one is ridiculous. What does Jesus expect his disciples to be? Human punching bags?

Jesus tells of a king who went to one of his slaves who owed him money. When the slave couldn't come up with the cash, the king threatened to sell him and his family so he could recoup at least some of his losses. The slave fell to his knees and begged the king to forgive the debt, which the king agreed to do. The lesson on forgiveness was lost on that first slave, who went to a fellow servant to demand the money the second slave owed him. When the second man begged the first to be patient until he could come up with the money, the first slave refused and had the man thrown into prison. Jesus says the first servant owed the king 10,000 talents. A talent was about 130 lbs. of silver and was the equivalent to about fifteen years of a laborer’s wages. That means that the servant owed his master about 150,000 years of labor. In other words, he would never, ever be able to pay his master back. A denarius, by comparison, was worth about a day’s wage, which meant that the second servant owed the forgiven one about a hundred days of labor – no small debt, but certainly doable.

Using numbers that we better understand today, say a servant made $10 an hour and worked 8 hours a day – probably not all that accurate, but something that fits our frame of reference. Multiply everything out and we find that the first servant owed his master the equivalent of about $3.6 billion and the second servant owed the first about $8000. Here's the bottom line: A slave is forgiven a debt of $3.6 billion then turns around and has a man put in prison for not repaying him $8000. It's outrageous – both the king's extravagance and the forgiven servant's hard-heartedness are hard for us to believe.

Imagine, for a moment, that you are the first servant in Jesus' story. Imagine that you are guilty of some of the offenses we named at the beginning – cheating, lying, rejecting another, stealing, ridiculing, belittling, betrayal. Maybe you're even guilty of all of them. Imagine all the things you have done stacked up one on top of another, like a stack of bills that represent an enormous debt. Imagine now the one to whom you owe the debt coming to you and telling you that your debt is forgiven. How would you feel? What would you do? How would you pass that forgiveness on to someone who has harmed you in some way?

Jesus walked calmly and deliberately to the fate that awaited him. Upon his shoulders were all the hurtful, shameful wrongs ever committed in the past and all that would be committed in the future. Jesus took his place on a cross; he died there with that burden upon him. When he was raised from death, the burden was gone; no trace of it remained. He appeared again among us to tell us that the weight of our sins has been lifted from our shoulders – all the things we have thought, all the things we have done, all we would do if we thought we could get away with it. Jesus wipes the slate clean and tells us that in him we have a second chance, new life, a chance to make things right. He washes away our sins in the same water in which he was baptized and he forgives us endlessly at his holy table. Then he lets us loose to practice forgiveness with our lives.

We find it all so difficult to believe. We don't deserve the gift of forgiveness, we tell ourselves. True. We could never repay what Jesus has done for us. Also true, but we don't have to. If Jesus really knew the depth of our sin, he couldn't forgive it. Not true. God's forgiveness is real. Undeserved, not reimbursable, aimed at the enormity of our sin, God's act in Christ is once and for all. And most certainly true.

The church is God's laboratory of forgiveness. Here we learn the extravagance of God's love, the abundant nature of God's grace, the power of God's love to change us. Here we learn what it means to be forgiven and to forgive. I decided this week to come up with an example of what this all might look like in our parish. I didn't have to think for long. Our parish parsonage served as a home for pastors and their families for many decades. About seven years ago, after a pastor and his family left the area, the house began a long period of vacancy. The members of the parish decided to sell the parsonage and to use the proceeds to help with future pastors' salaries, as the deed to the parsonage required. Thus began seven years of turmoil, of offers that didn't work out, of deferred maintenance, of a decline in the economy, of efforts to fix structural and other problems, of differing ideas of what to do with the house, culminating in what I'm calling “The Great Bamboozle.” It's been a tough ride. Some members have said things that have hurt others. Some don't think we got enough money for the parsonage. Others are annoyed that the process took so long. Feelings have been trampled upon. These past seven years have been difficult in that they have drained energy from the parish – energy that we could have invested in other things.

Here's where we are today: the parsonage has been sold. The proceeds will be invested and used to supplement the parish budget. Now is the time to think about forgiveness. We who have been forgiven seventy times seven times, 31.6 million times, now have the opportunity to forgive one another, to let go of hurt feelings, of animosity, of irritation and impatience and to come together to look at the future of our ministry together and imagine exciting new ventures in faith. That's what the gift of forgiveness, given first by a gracious Lord and extended forward by grateful disciples, can look like.

“Lord, if another sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times? Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Jesus does not intend to turn us into human punching bags. Those who assault and abuse and kill others must be responsible for their actions and must pay for their wrongs. Forgiveness for those kinds of harm is a long and difficult journey, one that often lasts a lifetime. For other kinds of sin, forgiveness is not only possible, it is what we are created to do. For us, forgiveness can be a decision about the past that opens the door to the future. It is an invitation to shed past hurts so we may most fully live today. Not forgiving can be like tying rocks to our feet as we try to make our way through life.

Jesus asks us to lavish the same forgiveness on others that God has so graciously given to us. Remember the first servant in Jesus' story. Again I ask: How does it feel to be forgiven such a large sum? Imagine the burden removed from your shoulders as the entire debt is canceled. Now pause for a moment and think of those to whom you can offer the same forgiveness you have received from God.

*Moment of silence.*

*Order for Confession and Forgiveness follows here.*

Amen.

*Season of Pentecost*

*Matthew 18:21-35*

*September 14, 2014*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*