**A reading from Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 18, verses 21-35**

Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?

As many as seven times?”

Jesus said to him,

**“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.**

**“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.**

**When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made.**

**26So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him,**

**‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’**

**And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.**

**But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’**

**So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him,**

**‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’**

**He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.**

**When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.**

**Then his master summoned him and said to him,**

**‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.**

**33And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’**

**And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.**

**So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”**

**SERMON**

**Give us today our daily bread.**
**12And forgive us our debts,**
**as we also have forgiven our debtors.**
**13And lead us not into temptation**
**but deliver us from the evil one.”**

**14For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.**

**15But if you do not forgive others their sins,**

**your Father will not forgive your sins.** [Matt 6]

Our readings today are difficult because they demand so much.

Let’s try to see the Gospel reading in context, It might help to soften it a bit - but only a bit.

Chapter 18 in Matthew’s Gospel begins with the disciples asking who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

**Jesus puts a child among them.**

No care is too great when dealing with the little ones - the vulnerable ones.

Not only must we avoid causing them to stumble, but we must also emulate their humility.

**Jesus continues with the Parable of the Lost Sheep:**

* No risk is too great when seeking one sheep that is lost. We must expend every effort to find the lost one and to restore it to the flock.

**Jesus then offers detailed guidance regarding the handling of conflict in the church:**

* No effort is too great when trying to restore peace in the church. The victim must take the initiative to seek out the offender and to resolve the conflict.
* It that cannot be accomplished one-to-one, the victim must seek the help of one or two others.
* If that fails, the victim must solicit the help of the whole church.

We cannot "write off" a fellow Christian. Even the final step of excommunication is intended as a wake-up call rather than irrevocable banishment.

Our text for this Sunday, then, simply extends the concerns of the earlier parts of the chapter by calling us to throw away the calculator when it comes to forgiveness.

The central issue is not justice but reconciliation.

**Today our concern is about forgiveness**. It is a difficult word to hear because we find forgiveness difficult - both to receive and to give. However, it is also an urgent word, because receiving and giving forgiveness is central to our faith.

**Why is it so difficult to forgive?**

**Listen to this story:**

Meanwhile, in the Church, the organist began playing the organ at 12:55.

At about 1:05, the packed house started turning their heads, looking for the Vicar.

The secretary called his home but there was no answer.

At 2 o’clock, in desperation, the secretary called the neighbouring Church and asked their Vicar if he would conduct the funeral, and he rushed right over.

And at 3:30, Fr. Roy finally woke up, rushed to the church, saw it was empty, **and became sick to his stomach**.

That evening, he went to the family’s home, and when the widow answered the door, looked at Fr. Roy and said

“**I will never forgive you. Not ever!”**

And she slammed the door in his face.

**Can we blame her? How would we have reacted?**

And yet we all remember the bombing at Enniskillen when a father, himself injured, holding the hand of his dead daughter saying,

**"I bear no ill will. Dirty sort of talk is not going to bring her back to life. She was a great wee lassie,"**

Maybe some of us are struggling with the issue of forgiveness today.

Perhaps we have been wounded by someone and cannot bring ourselves to forgive them.

Or we may have been have been the offender, like Fr. Roy, and we ourselves have alienated someone we care about deeply **and it makes us sick to the stomach**. This sermon is for us today, as we consider this most difficult human action.

**And so what is the message from the word of our Lord in this week’s Gospel?**

Jesus had been talking about God’s command always to seek reconciliation.

But the disciples found this difficult to digest and so,

**always the one to put his foot into it**,

Peter went to Jesus and asked:

"Lord, how often shall my brother (or sister) sin against me,

and I forgive him? How often? Until seven times?"

Seven was generous. I think that most of us would agree with that.

How many times do YOU think we should have to forgive someone who offends us?

 A friend of mine once said,

**"If someone strikes me on one cheek, I'll turn the other cheek. But if he strikes me on that cheek,**

**he had better watch out."**

In other words, "I'll forgive once, but not twice."

I think many of us would agree with him.

But Peter didn't say, **"Should I forgive once?"**

**or "Should I forgive twice?"**

Peter said, **"Should I forgive as many as seven times?"**

That was generous. The rabbinical standard for forgiveness was three times - not seven - three times. Peter knew that. He could have asked Jesus, "Should I forgive three times?"

So how could Jesus find fault with forgiving seven times?

But Jesus surprised Peter. He said, **"I don't tell you until seven times, but, until seventy times seven".**

They’re arguments about whether the Greek means "seventy PLUS seven" - or "seventy TIMES seven.

Either way, if it is 77 or 490 Jesus had set an impossibly high standard.

We should notice that Peter didn't argue with Jesus. Somewhat earlier, Peter **had** argued with Jesus, and it hadn't turned out well. Jesus had turned on Peter and called him Satan – a stumbling block. Jesus had accused Peter of setting his mind on earthly things instead of heavenly things.

So Jesus gave them a parable. In the parable, a servant owed the king an enormous sum of money - ten thousand talents ––a huge amount of money.

Ten thousand talents **was** like all the money in the world - and more. The average week’s wage was one talent and it would take 192 year’s wages to pay the debt!!

The servant pleaded for mercy -- for time, and I'll repay everything - an empty promise. The servant knew **that,**

and so did the king - but it was all that the servant could offer. **Just give me a little more time!**

But the king, knowing that the servant's situation was hopeless, was moved by compassion. In a remarkable show of generosity, he forgave that servant his debt. He removed the burden from the servant's shoulders permanently. He set him free.

But **we** know, upon leaving the king's presence, that servant found a man who owed him money - the equivalent of a few months' pay. The servant demanded immediate payment. The debtor pled for mercy, but the servant had him thrown in jail until he could pay his debt.

The other servants told the king what had happened, and the king told the servant.

**"You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt, because you begged me. Shouldn't you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, even as I had mercy on you?"**

So, the king had the servant thrown into prison until he could repay his debt. There was no chance that the servant could ever repay ten thousand talents, so he was going to spend the rest of his life in prison. **That sounds about right, doesn’t it?**

But we must remember that this is Jesus telling **us** a parable and we are listening to **Him** as The Lord God speaks to **us**.

**"You wicked servants! I forgave you all your sins because you begged me. Shouldn't you also have had mercy on your fellow servants, even as I had mercy on you?"**

**God has forgiven all our sins - all of them - at great cost to Himself.**

**God has used Jesus' blood to wash them down the drain. They are gone and forgotten.**

If we stop to think about some of the bad things we have done, we will realize that God has handed us a great gift. He has taken the burden from our shoulders - **permanently**.

He has made us free.

But then God expects you and me, having **experienced** forgiveness, to **practice** forgiveness. That's the point of this parable and we do not find it easy.

**And forgiveness is costly** – it cost Jesus his life and when **we** forgive, something has to die within **us**.

R. T. Kendall in his book “Total Forgiveness” talks about the connection between forgiving and reconciling.

Just saying the words, is not enough. Forgiving involves us **in being a blessing to the person in words and in action**.

Let’s count it as a great blessing to us that Jesus taught us to forgive.

Anger is a poison that eats away at us from the inside.

Anger literally has the power to kill.

* Anger inspires murder, so it is dangerous to the offender –
* Anger also has the potential to disrupt relationships - not just with the person with whom we are angry, but also with others - our husband or wife - our children - our co-workers - you name it.

When we are angry, our anger spills over into everything we do and everyone we touch. Anger is a cancer.

When Jesus tells us to forgive, he is telling us to let go of our anger. He is telling us to drain the poison before it kills us.

Let me close with a true story. In his book, *Beyond Myself*, Gilbert Bowen tells the story of Tom Fleming, a 22-year-old husband and father. Fleming was carrying around a load of anger, and his anger made it difficult for him to hold a job. His anger caused him to be short-tempered with his children. It affected everything he did and everyone he touched.

Recognising that he had a problem, Fleming went to a counsellor - a man named Donald Hope.

After some months, Hope realized that Fleming was angry with his alcoholic father - who had belittled Fleming and made his life miserable.

Fleming now understood where his anger was coming from, but it didn't solve the problem.

Then Fleming talked about it with his minister, who suggested that Fleming tried to forgive his father.

**There's that word again––"forgive**."

The minister prayed for Fleming, asking God to help Fleming forgive his father - asking God to help Fleming overcome his anger. Fleming prayed too.

He prayed for grace to forgive his father.

**When he did that, he felt a peace come over him - a peace that he had not previously known.**

The next day, Fleming went to see his father.

**"Dad," he said, "Last night I asked God to help me forgive you. I think maybe it worked."**

**Fleming's father began to cry**. It was truly a new beginning for both of them.

Donald Hope, the therapist, said that he was amazed at the transformation that came over Fleming. Having released his anger - having forgiven his father - he was, - perhaps for the first time ever - at peace with himself.

Jesus has given us a wonderful gift. When he teaches us to forgive, he is enabling us to drain the poison that would otherwise ruin our lives.

So when we hear Jesus say, "Forgive seventy**-**seven times," let's not hear that as an impossible standard.

Let's hear it as a great blessing - as an invitation to begin a new life - as an invitation to become really, really free, possibly for the first time in our lives.

The story is told of a ship's captain who saw lights in the distance.  He told his radio operator to send a message to the other ship to change course 20 degrees to the east.  The radio operator received a reply, "Change YOUR course 20 degrees to the west.

The captain wasn't happy.  He told the radio operator to resend the message telling the other ship to change course to the east, this time adding:  **"I Am The Captain."**

The radio operator received this reply.  "Change YOUR course 20 degrees to the west.  **I AM THE LIGHTHOUSE."**

We don't like threats, but we should appreciate warnings.  As someone said,  "It's better to be saved by a lighthouse than by a lifeboat."

 That's what Jesus is doing when he tells us to forgive one another.  He isn't threatening us.  He is warning us to save us.  He is warning us that God expects us to forgive others as God has forgiven us.

Let me close with a question.  It's an important question.  Here it is.

Who is it that I need to forgive today?

Who is Christ calling me to forgive today?

Let’s give that some thought now.

**Whom do I need to forgive?**

*Pause*

Lord, in your Mercy,

**Hear our prayer.**