

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
Nate Irvine, Campus/Young Adult Minister
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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For those that I have not had the pleasure of meeting, my name is Nate Irvine, and I am the new Campus/Young Adult Minister for the Milwaukee Area for the diocese. And part of what that means is as part of this half-time role, I get to plug in at St. Mark's on Sundays half the month. It's been so great getting to know all of you, and I look forward to meeting everyone else. You guys are so sweet and kind!

Previous to this job, I worked for The Salvation Army church, the church I was born and raised in actually, for 15 years, 13 of which were in Chicago doing youth work with teens and young adults. Then in 2019, we moved here to Milwaukee, and I was able to serve as the lead chaplain at The Salvation Army's shelter on 7th and Walnut for two years.

But in the summer of 2021, it was clear to us that we needed a change. We don't have time for me to talk about the why behind our leaving, but when we did, my wife gave me one of the most beautiful gifts ever: we decided that I should take a sabbatical from ministry, and so I took the next year off to be home with our son, Judah. At the time, he was going to begin K4 which only ran for three hours a day. And at 10:20 a.m., after what felt like dropping him off five minutes ago, I'd turn around to pick him up and spend the rest of the day with him. I absolutely loved it. We got to spend so much time together, playing together, going on day trips and adventures. Watching him swim for the first time without help or floaties absolutely blew my mind; going to Wrigley Field to watch one of my best friends throw out the first pitch; taking him to his first t-ball practice; taking him to the Bucks parade. And honestly, it was the best job I've ever had, and I am convinced it's the best job I'll ever have. When he went to K5 for full-day kindergarten, while he was so stoked about school (because he loves school so much) I sobbed like a baby. If you don't believe me, my wife has it on video.

I often say to people that that year was extremely revelatory and clarifying to me. First, it helped reveal just how much of my identity was tied up in my job - and I thought I had a good work/life balance figured out. But second, it helped me realize that there are really only three things I deeply care about in life - having a healthy relationship with my partner Danielle, and having a healthy relationship with our son, Judah, and having a healthy relationship with God. Everything else to me is negotiable. They are truly the most important things in my life, and everything else is on the table.

It was a reminder of who I really am at my core, and what really anchors and roots me. That perspective.

And in today's Gospel, Jesus is attempting to do something very similar with Peter - he's trying to remind Peter that he's a beloved child of God at his core, and that perspective should drive everything else.

But this conversation between Peter and Jesus doesn't occur in a vacuum, and our Gospel reading today doesn't start at the beginning of the conversation either.

Peter just heard Jesus talk about what true repentance and reconciliation in the church are supposed to look like. And Jesus outlines this three-step process that we heard about in last week's Gospel reading; a process that starts with truth telling, naming the offense, being crystal clear about it, and then allowing the offender several opportunities to admit their fault and repent. The process supports the offended person, even rallying around them as a community, by naming and holding up the truth of what happened, and it shows mercy to the one who offended, calling for true repentance.

It's in the context of this conversation, then, that Peter turns to Jesus and asks how many times he ought to forgive his brother or sister. Peter literally asks, "Jesus, am I supposed to forgive my brother seven times?" And scholars would point out that Peter isn't attempting to limit the number of times he's to forgive someone. Seven is a number symbolizing perfection. So scholar Lewis Donelson writes that he's probably asking something to the effect of, "Jesus, am I supposed to practice perfect forgiveness?" To which Jesus responds with his own math equation, which clearly implies, "No, you have to be more than perfect when it comes to forgiveness, and there are no limits."¹

On one hand, I think we need to give credit to Peter. Because I think part of what's happening here is that Peter is putting a finger on something I think we all identify with. The reason we even have a parable in the first place is because Peter is wrestling through something that is very real to all of us if we're honest. As Jesus is teaching them about the reality of the brokenness and messiness that is living in a community of faith, a reality that includes confession and reconciliation, Peter starts to notice something's not quite sitting well with him. As his heart begins to catch up with what his brain is hearing, he asks Jesus, "Do you really mean we have to forgive every time? I mean, how???"

Jesus reminds Peter *and us* of who we are at our core. He roots us in our redeemed relationship with God. Jesus goes over the top on purpose to highlight and overemphasize one thing for us - that the mercy shown to us ought to fundamentally change who we are so that we show that same mercy to our neighbors.

And we are told this story drenched with hyperbole and exaggeration in which a servant who owes a massive debt to his lord that he has no chance in repaying, begs for forgiveness of his debt, and his lord actually does. Only that same servant finds another servant who owes him a miniscule amount in comparison, but the forgiven servant doesn't forgive.

¹ Bartlett, David Lyon. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 4, Season after Pentecost. (Propers 17 - Reign of Christ)*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2011, p. 69.

There is an obvious disconnect on the part of the forgiven servant. And we are left to wonder how in the world that could possibly be. But it also begs the question for us: Is it possible that we have the same disconnect in our lives? Is it possible that even though our massive debt has been erased, we turn around and instead of being merciful, instead of allowing what God's done for us to reorient us, instead of allowing that same mercy to flow through us to the dry and arid places around us, we harbor bitterness and anger instead? If so, I simply want to say, as antithetical to this homily as it may be, that we can all likely relate.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a story that highlights this very real and understandable struggle to forgive.

A divorced single mother of three from his congregation comes to see him and says, "Since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle to pay the bills, while he lives it up in a different state with his new wife. How am I supposed to forgive that?"

And Rabbi Kushner responded, "I'm not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn't. It was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter angry woman. I'd like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of your life physically, but you keep holding on to him. You're not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, but you're hurting yourself."²

The other fellow servants, observing this scene, raise a cry for justice, getting the original king involved again, who hands the unmerciful servant over to be tortured. And then Jesus ends the story with these happy words: "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

If this ending makes you super uncomfortable and like you want nothing to do with that Jesus, then may I gently suggest that I think the parable is doing its job. This idea that Jesus is so serious about forgiveness, so deeply committed to the practice of us forgiving one another, that, in obvious hyperbole, he says he'll torture us if we don't forgive each other, drives the point home in such a ferocious way. As much as I bristle at the thought of God being so harsh, I think that Jesus is quite effective in helping us realize that forgiveness ought to be absolutely fundamental to those who follow Jesus. That our community of faith ought to be known for its mercy.

And if this notion that Jesus is all the way serious about forgiveness is out of pocket for him, it's not. We don't have to look very far either. We pray this idea every Sunday in the Lord's prayer. And I wonder. Maybe each Sunday, instead of only praying the Lord's prayer, we ought to also pray what Jesus said afterwards too: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly

² Bartlett, David Lyon. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 4, Season after Pentecost. (Propers 17 - Reign of Christ)*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2011, p. 72.

Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

I also wonder if since we repeat the Lord's Prayer so frequently if it hasn't lost some of its meaning to us. Do we really realize what we're saying? “And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

God, forgive me, but forgive me only as much as I forgave my partner this week.

God, I'm sorry, forgive me, but feel free to hold onto some of that anger and rage just like I've been doing.

Lord, forgive me, but please, exact some old-school retribution on me today, just like I plan to do to my coworker this week.

Each week, we're asking God to forgive us, but with a condition - a condition we pray over ourselves. We ask God to forgive us, but only in the same way that we practice forgiveness.

May we pray these words today with sincerity, and with our very lives. Amen.