

Homily based on the readings from August 14, 2025 (Joshua 3.7-10a, 11, 13-17; Matthew 18.21-19.1)

As some of you may know, my secular employment – what I do for a living when I am not at church – is teaching mathematics. It is a rewarding profession, but I realized – very early in my career – that discussing mathematics outside of work is unlikely to make me any friends. Nevertheless, there are still some situations where paying attention to *numbers* can be quite instructive.

In today's Gospel, we see Saint Peter trying to go above and beyond what he believes is required. His understanding, based on the religious tradition of the day, is that a person should be willing to forgive another individual either three or four times – depending on how generous he is feeling. Saint Peter decides to combine these two numbers (in other words, three plus four is seven), hoping that his *exceptional* willingness to *forgive* will earn him some sort of commendation. Jesus, of course, is having none of it. He blasts Peter's suggestion out of the water,

commanding him to forgive seventy-seven times – or, according to some translations, 490 times. The message, of course, is that if we are even *bothering* to count how many times we have forgiven somebody, we are totally missing the point of forgiveness.

Jesus provides a parable to illustrate this teaching more dramatically. The translation we use at Mass somewhat obscures how *ridiculous* the situation is – it simply says that the first servant owes the king “a huge amount,” while the second servant owes the first servant “a much smaller amount.” In fact, the amount the first servant owes is – without exaggeration – 600,000 times what the second servant owes. In modern currency, the first servant’s debt is roughly three and a half *billion* dollars and the second servant’s is roughly six *thousand* dollars. The point here is that the two debts are completely incomparable. The first debt is infinite, while the second is infinitesimal. Any debt that another human being owes *us* – any wrong we have suffered at the hands of one of our brothers or sisters – is totally inconsequential in relation to the incalculable debt *we* owe our Creator.

As with many of the precepts of our faith, this one is simpler in principle than in practice. It is easy to extol the virtues of forgiveness from a safe distance, but it is much harder when we have experienced the offense firsthand. Not just anyone has been injured or abused – we are talking about our *own* suffering or – even worse – that of our *spouse* or our *child*. How can we *possibly* be expected to forgive a wound that is still causing us daily anguish?

The answer, of course, is that we are all required to forgive – with no exceptions and no qualifications. The fact that forgiveness is *difficult* is part of what makes it *meaningful*. As with all the challenges we face in this life, Christ does not leave us on our own. Besides his own example of forgiveness, he has given us countless others – from Saint Stephen forgiving his murderers to Saint Maria Goretti forgiving her would-be rapist to Saint John Paul II forgiving his attempted assassin. Christ will provide us with the strength to forgive – if we are willing to accept it.

One of the most powerful tools for forgiveness will be available to all of us in just a few moments. Through the Holy Eucharist – the Bread of Heaven – God offers himself to his people as nourishment, as sustenance. Uniting ourselves *with him* is the only way to become *like him*. Relying on our own abilities, we would be doing well to forgive seven times, let alone seventy-seven. By surrendering ourselves to our Risen Lord, we open our hearts to receiving and – just as importantly, to sharing – his boundless and immeasurable mercy.