





1. Image intervened with AI Chat GPT to give colors and to expand pixels for printing quality.
2. Original, from the MFA in Boston. Basque, Medieval.

“Forgiveness,” by Rev. Dr. Mark Caggiano, September 13, 2026

Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35

Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Jesus goes on to tell the parable of the slave who sought mercy from his master the king. The master forgave his enormous debt – more than the wealth of a kingdom – but the slave in turn showed no mercy to someone in his own debt. A far smaller debt.

The master finds out about this uneven mercy and calls him a wicked slave for failing to forgive as he had been forgiven. Forgiveness in this sense was shown to be open to all, but somehow selective when someone forgiven was in turn asked to forgive.

Why do we forgive? Because someone has done something wrong. Sometimes to us, sometimes in general. And in a very real sense, we might in our own lives cycle through asking for mercy and being asked to grant mercy. I did something wrong, so please do not hold it against me. But like the first slave, there is no obvious link between what has been received and what might be given. You did something wrong, so you should pay the very last cent, you should be held accountable, whatever that means.

An expansive sense of mercy sounds like a good thing when one is the recipient of that mercy. But it might become a different story when someone hurt you, when someone failed you in some way. We can justify our need to have your shortcomings overlooked, but when we are the ones slighted or the ones injured, we might find it harder to be so magnanimous.

Well, maybe it has happened over and over again. Maybe this time seemed like the last straw. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Peter was asking about the lengths to which we are expected to forgive. He tried to tighten up the numbers. Do I forgive my brother seven times? That seems like a good Biblical amount. Jesus responded seventy-seven times. In other places it is seventy times seven, or 490.

The number does not really matter because the idea is that mercy should not be doled out by the teaspoon but poured out lavishly whenever it is needed. Forgiveness should be readily available, like in the parable of the Prodigal Son and unlike the parable of the unforgiving slave.

That does not mean there should not be concern about what was done. “Forgive and forget” is not a phrase used in the Bible but one that came into use in the medieval period. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting. Forgiveness does not require a clean slate or even a fresh start. It simply means that the person was forgiven.

And for those seeking forgiveness, it does not mean simply saying that you are sorry. Forgiveness in the Christian tradition requires repentance, a direct or even a public acknowledgement that you have done something wrong and that you will not do it again. That is far more than telling someone to kiss and make up. That is more than trying to keep the peace among squabbling siblings. And because this transition leading toward forgiveness takes effort and sincerity, we often skip over it all simply to make nice.

“Making nice” is not a good goal when it comes to our lives, but it seems to be the highest priority for some. No feathers ruffled. Peace and quiet in the home. A serene face offered to the world no matter what is roiling below the surface. Looking good rather than seeking that which is good.

You may have noticed the large poster at the front of the room. It depicts a medieval era fresco from a Catalonian church, one that is in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The artist is unknown, but it is from the 12th century which you might guess from the distinctive two-dimensional Romanesque style.

Compare this flattened painting style with far more realistic sculptures and paintings of the earlier Roman era, which these later artists could not readily duplicate. You need time and practice, and some wealthy patronage, to achieve that level of art. It would not be until the Renaissance period centuries later that ideas of perspective and anatomical study would again be used in European art and the artistic styles of Rome and Greece came back into use.

The other day, Diego and I went off to the printer to pick up the poster and the copies in your orders of service. As we were waiting, I looked at one of the copies and I was surprised. If any of you have seen this piece in the museum, you might have also noticed the issue. The fresco here is complete and brightly colored. The version in the museum is broken, faded in places, and is generally less colorful.

I asked Diego about this, and he said that he had used an AI application to fill in what was missing. How that happens is beyond me, but the holes were filled in and the colors restored. It was as if nothing had happened over the past thousand years.

I had been planning on writing about the imagery of the four evangelists at the top, the winged animals which are symbols drawn from the Book of Ezekiel and which have been historically used to represent the writers of the gospels. But then I read the Gospel selection for today. And I decided to write about something else. That topic is forgiveness.

What had artificial intelligence done here? It filled in the blanks. It restored what might go into those missing areas. It juiced up the colors, which likely came from natural dyes that might have faded over the centuries.

Make it whole. Make it complete. Make it nice.

And yet, I wonder if we have done a disservice here, no offense to Diego. The idea of restoring something that is broken seems like a good idea, but then again, you are losing something along the way. How was it broken? An earthquake? The pillaging of a city? The slow grinding pressures of time? Part of the story of that piece of art is how it got to this moment in time.

Much like a human being, we can age gracefully or we can look to science and medicine to hold back or even reverse the ravages of time. As I stand up here with my shiny white hair, you can probably guess my stand on that personal question. When it comes to art, I like to imagine the sweep of time and what it has meant for that art. If you compare this fresco to earlier Roman art and later Renaissance pieces, it is clearly different. The Romans spent considerable time and effort beautifying their cities and copied the best of Greek art. The medieval period was rougher in many ways and art may have taken a back seat.

People have also recently remarked that the Romans did not actually like plain white marble statues. Those seemingly quintessential white statues were originally brightly painted in what might be best described as gaudy colors. Paints which faded over time and, I would guess, were later removed as dirt and grime rather than faded paint.

Should we go back and repaint all those Roman statues? Or do we prefer these pristine white statues, as if we were to leave our houses unpainted. Are we better off trying to restore what was, as if nothing happened, or should we leave these old works of art alone, warts and all? That is a question art lovers and experts might ponder.

I have another question, however. Should we forgive *and* forget?

Like the enhanced and restored fresco here, should we turn back the clock of time on our relationships? Fill in the broken parts as if they had never been broken. Sketch in what should have been there, or at least, what we assumed should have been there. Because that sort of restoration is speculation.

We might *never* have had a good relationship with our parents or siblings or partners. And instead of remembering what has happened, we might present a nicer, more appealing version of a story that never happened. Nostalgia for what never was.

I was recently visiting my son and daughter-in-law and their two daughters. Lily is 4 and Katie is 1. And if you have ever spent time with 4 and 1 year-olds, it is not entirely a picture of harmony. Lily wants to play a board game in the middle of the floor and Katie delightedly comes to knock everything over. Lily cries to her mother about the injustice of the world and Katie starts chewing on the board pieces.

At their ages, my granddaughters are not at the point when you can meaningfully expect them to understand. Lily is in that very self-centered young child mindset that does not grasp that mommies need to sleep once in a while. And Katie is a havoc inducing bulldozer who is hilariously unaware of the meaning of “no.”

But as they get older, that will change. Hopefully. And when that happens, I hope to never inflict upon them the phrase, “Kiss and make up.” Or even a simple demand that someone say that they are sorry. Because that is neither fair nor particularly helpful.

That is because children do bratty things to one another and someone goes running to an adult to save them from consequences. And parents, lovely and tired parents, might simply expect one person to say they are sorry when that person was the instigator. That person was the one who flipped over the game board or took something without asking or some other child-scaled injustice. All you are teaching the children is that you need to be sneakier about it. That the first one to complain wins out.

Move forward a decade or so and that dynamic can work its way into adult relationships. Someone does something and gets called out for it. Someone says sorry and it is “forgive and forget.” But forgive and forget is again not a Biblical notion nor is it even a good idea. It may seem like a good idea in the moment to hurry along past difficulties, but that pattern can become a problem. One person may become used to a friend or partner gliding past difficulties, making it more likely that there will be future difficulties.

Now this is also a question of degree. One partner might be the exacting type who never let's go of past problems. Do you remember when you forgot the birthday present, an event which happened during the Reagan Administration? There is a difference between holding a grudge and not forgetting.

In Japan, there is a distinct practice for restoring broken porcelain known as *kintsugi*. A broken plate or cup is glued back together using lacquer. And then rather than trying to hide the crack, it is coated in gold or silver dust making it all the more visible.

This search for beauty in brokenness may be connected to the Zen practices of Japanese Buddhism. One must accept the passage of time and the possibility of imperfection. And, in a sense, to not be attached to the mere appearance of things rather than the reality of the world.

Forgiveness is about restoring and maintaining relationships. Jesus told Peter that you need to forgive 77 times, but then he told the story of the master and the two slaves. The master forgave the first person's debt, who turned around demanding repayment of a smaller debt in turn owed to him. The master becomes furious and punishes the first slave. That seems a lot less than 77 times, but again the number is not the important part. The nature of the relationship is what matters.

And if there is still any doubt in your minds about the number, call to mind the most basic prayer of Christianity, the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Or if you prefer that language directly used in the Bible, "And forgive us our *debts*, as we forgive our *debtors*." This is exactly why Jesus uses the story of the two indebted slaves to explain what he means by forgiveness. We are expected to forgive in the same way we might expect forgiveness of our own sins by God.

And if anyone is saying to themselves, "Well, I never sin," you will need to stay after class for additional tutoring. Because everyone sins. Everyone makes mistakes. And that is because we are imperfect creatures. We are also all different and those differences lead to friction. That does not mean that one person is right and the other is wrong, they are simply different.

The neat person arguing with the slob – you need to sort that out so neither person is perpetually the bad one. Because neither of you is right in any real sense because the relationship takes priority over any one person's priorities. Speaking as a slob, by the way.

The person who is always late versus the one who is always early. It is honestly the same dynamic. And if you somehow married someone from an always late or always on time culture, you've got to learn to live with it somehow.

Because if that is the sum total of your problems in a relationship, you are truly blessed.

Which brings up an important question: what if it is something beyond lateness or neatness? What if it is something abusive or beyond? The formula for forgiveness still works in higher stakes settings.

If a person has done something hurtful to you, they must repent and seek forgiveness. Repentance requires stating that something was wrong, directly or publicly. It requires saying that you are sorry for what happened or for what failed to happen, sincerely, and that you will not do it again. You need all those pieces of the puzzle.

Of course, that does not mean that someone will not do the same thing again. But the question of sincerity is important. If like Peter's example, the person apologizes seven times, you might get the sense that after seven times their repentance is not sincere. Jesus is not necessarily asking us to be foolish, but he is asking us potentially to forgive even grave transgressions.

C.S. Lewis wrote a short book entitled, "The Great Divorce," which is an account of what heaven might be like. In the story, a man takes a bus up to heaven's entrance and there he sees someone he knew in life. According to the story, that person had killed someone. But here he was in heaven. The man from the bus could not understand how such a person was in heaven, but the second man said that he had asked God for forgiveness and was forgiven.

The first man refused to accept this and further refused to enter heaven. He would rather be self-righteous in hell than be with someone he disliked in paradise.

That's a story. And every story has another side to it. In our relationships, we are more familiar with and honestly partial to our side of the story. But that does not mean there is not another side. That does not mean there was not a reason for someone trespassing against us in some way. That reason might not excuse what happened, but it might explain why it happened.

And receiving that explanation is a part of the process for forgiveness. It might rise to the level of an excuse, good or bad, and you might or might not accept it as such. Which then leads to the apology and the decision whether to accept it. To forgive or to remain at odds.

Here's an experiment for you. Take your hand and hold it out in front of you. Imagine someone you are angry with, or had been angry with, inside. Squeeze your hand tight. Squeeze it like you are angry at whatever pretend thing is inside.

Now keep squeezing – forever. Never stop. From this day forward keep it clenched like that. For some people, that is what it is like to hold onto a grudge.

And yes, you can stop squeezing now.

Forgiveness is something we give to others, but it is also a gift we give to ourselves. We drop the tension we feel in our hearts and minds. We relax from something pressing down on us. We can finally let go.

Years ago, I was speaking to someone who had a terrible relationship with his father. He could not forgive the father for how the son had been treated during his childhood. The men got older and the father passed away without them ever having reconciled. And so, this man came to me and said he regretted never having come to terms with his father and never reaching that point of potential forgiveness.

I offered to the man the example of squeezing his hand forever. And I asked him if he could ever imagine letting go of that tension, of relaxing his hand, of forgiving a man who he would not see again in this life. I do not know if he was ever able to truly let go of that sense of harm that he felt – and that he *rightfully* felt I will add. But he was doing no great service to himself by not letting go. He was burdening his heart and mind when there was no hope of reconciliation. But that was his choice to make.

And I would say the same to you all. Forgiveness requires far more than saying you are sorry, far more than restoring outward appearances. And yet forgiveness is also a true gift. A gift both to

the person forgiven and to the person offering that forgiveness. Think carefully about what you do unto others and whether you are willing ever to let go of even your righteous anger.

And so, let us go forth with hearts open to forgiveness and hearts ready for repentance.

Amen.