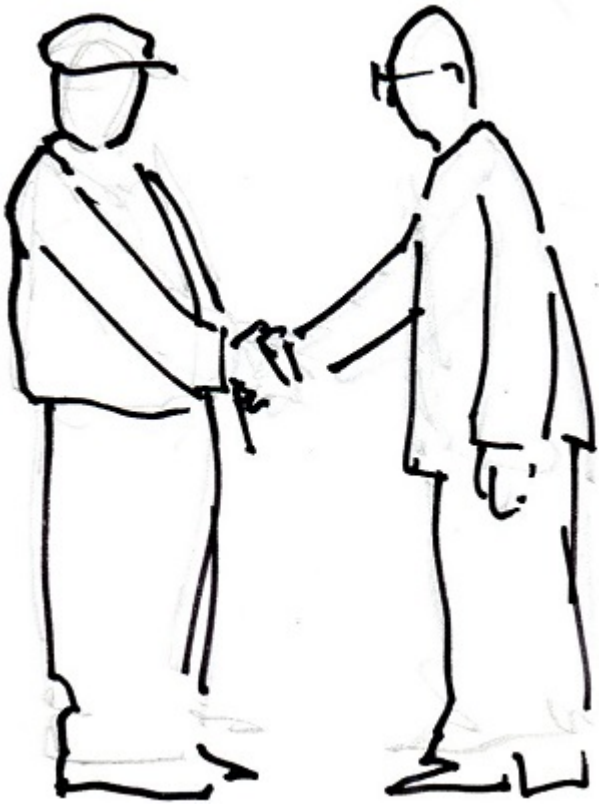
Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





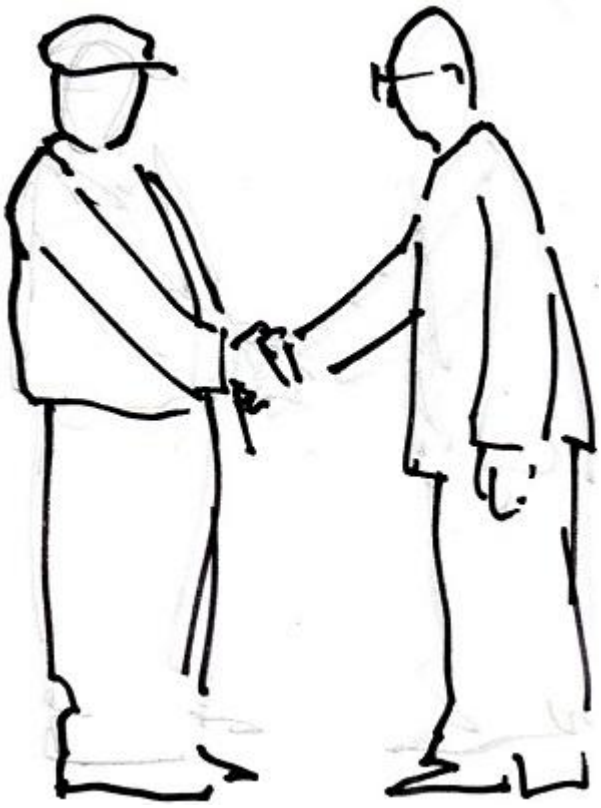
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“How often must I forgive?” (Matt 18:21).

Ez 12:1-12; *Matt 18:21–19:1*

Because it is Peter who asks Jesus about the limits of forgiveness, we can assume that the other disciples have asked him to represent their shared skepticism about such extravagant generosity. Seven is the max. How could anyone forgive after seven offenses? The world would fall apart if the hammer did not come down on any sinner who pushed the limit past that.

But, of course, Jesus is not talking about quantity, whether seven or seven time seventy. He is talking about the quality of mercy that is never withheld. Jesus clearly meant forgiveness as a way of life, an essential characteristic of the person who forgives. Because it is not about the one who offends; it is about what defines the one who forgives. It is an invitation to imitate God: “Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful.”

The mercy of God is the point of the powerful story Jesus tells about the two debtors. If we really understand that our very existence is a gratuitous act of mercy from God, who called us into existence, sustains us in each moment of our lives, healing and loving and forgiving us continuously as we stumble toward maturity – if we

really knew how much God cherishes us even when we ignore or turn away grace after grace – we would never think to be any less generous with our fellow human beings for their faults and trespasses.

Peter is chosen to lead the church because he needed God’s mercy, perhaps even more than any of the other disciples. His debt to Jesus was more than he could have ever hoped to settle, yet Jesus forgave him. His failure opened up a chasm of shame only divine mercy could fill, and this is what he preached to others.

From the smallest apology to the most difficult repentance, we advance in holiness each time we forgive or ask to be forgiven. It may take us seven times, or seven times seventy, because mercy is a lifetime lesson that only God can accomplish in us. This is the joy of the Gospel.

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