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How many times?

by Patricia Datchuck Sánchez

When Peter, as featured in today's Gospel, asked Jesus, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive?" his question was probably prompted by a specific situation or a series of circumstances. Like all of us, Peter had known the hurt that is an inevitable aspect of interpersonal relationships. He may even have been mistreated, cheated or betrayed. Peter had also known suspicion and rejection because he chose to follow Jesus. But, through it all, Peter was also learning more and more about Jesus and the ways and the will of God that were being revealed in Jesus. He was learning also to integrate his faith in Jesus with the life that he lived, by allowing the mind and heart of Jesus to grace, enlighten and guide him. Therefore, Peter's question was not at all calculating. It sprang from a generous heart that was willing to forego the traditional, measured revenge ("An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth," Leviticus 24:20) in order to embrace Jesus' nonviolent attitude toward others, even enemies. But the mere refraining from revenge and retaliation is not forgiveness. Peter knew this. For that reason Jesus' response to him was all the more challenging and disconcerting.

Today, especially on this day on which we mark the 10th year since criminal and violent acts were perpetrated on thousands of innocent people, Peter's question confronts us all with a challenge that seems almost untenable. It requires that we take stock of ourselves as human beings and as believers and ask ourselves, "How many times must I forgive?" dozens of tragic memories flood our minds because 9/11 was not a singular act of evil. Rather, it came on the heels of a spate of other such attacks on planes, ships, embassies, trains, churches, synagogues, mosques, marketplaces and all the people whose lives were ended or forever disrupted. It may be tempting to rationalize and to categorize such acts in a class of their own: *unforgivable!* It is tempting also to think that those so victimized could not possibly be expected to pardon such inhuman behavior. We may even sympathize with those who hold wrath and anger tight and plot the vengeance they think they deserve. How tempting to ignore or to discount the exhortation of a Jesus ben Sira who called his wronged contemporaries to forgive injustices and pray so that their own sins might be forgiven. How tempting to set aside Paul's challenges as

applicable but only to a long ago, simpler era of history. All these temptations notwithstanding, as we allow Peter's question to penetrate our hearts and resonate within us, we cannot help but admire his attempt at magnanimity. "Shall I forgive as many as seven times?" With that offer, Peter was showing that he was willing to go beyond Jewish law to embrace Jesus' teachings and to apply them in practical situations. But Jesus was leading Peter beyond practicality to that place where only faith can sustain the seeming insanity of forgiving evil and injustice, not just seven times, but without limit.



How many times? When we begin to count and to keep a memory ledger

of another's sins, we have already begun to diminish the challenge of Jesus. Just as God never measures mercies or limits forgiveness and just as Jesus held nothing back but gave himself fully and freely for sinners, so are the forgiven to extend mercy and forgiveness to others. These mercies and pardons are not limited to family, friends and next-door neighbors but to all. These mercies and pardons are not contingent upon the worthiness of the sinner nor on our judgment as to the sincerity of his/her desire to make amends. Nor are the mercies and pardons we owe to one another as fellow sinners confined to those of our own country, culture or religion. Even those whose principles and ideologies contradict our own are not outside the scope of God's mercies; neither can these be "written off" because, as Paul reminds us today, "We are the Lord's." In that capacity and because of our belonging, we are bound to forgive others, regardless of who they are or what they have done.

If our belonging to the God whose mercy knows no limit does not inspire us to forgive, perhaps the warning of Jesus ben Sira and the Matthean Jesus will provide the impetus. Forgive injustice, urges ben Sira and when you pray, you will be forgiven. These thoughts are echoed in today's Gospel: "Should you not have pity... as I had pity on you?" With this challenge affirmed once more in our hearing, do we dare to continue to ask, "How many times?"

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