



September 17, 2017 - Joy and Freedom in Forgiving Given by Pastor Mattei

Jesus' response to Peter's inquiry is absurd and totally in opposition to the ways the world works. In a free society the social contract assumes that there is a system of credit and debit regulating human relations. If you offer a service you earn a credit which your debtor will compensate at the proper time as per agreement. When the credit/debit balance is upset, the law and the court system provide the necessary security for a fair outcome.

There are times in a people's life when tragedy strikes and the credit/debit system is set aside to make room for human kindness to provide for the needy. We have seen much neighborly kindness in the aftermath of two tremendous hurricanes, Harvey and Irma. Many of you have been either sympathetic benefactors or grateful receivers as people helped each other overcome the hardship of an evacuation. And, as often is the case, those who gave enjoyed giving and were grateful to those who gratefully accepted their kindness. Giving and receiving gets blurred in a heartwarming dance.

We seem to be hardwired to assist others in time of need knowing that offering a helping hand is the humane and unselfish thing to do. We do that automatically, even before we stop and think that we hope one day others will do the same to us when we are at the receiving end.

But in "normal" times when the crisis is over we revert back to the economic system we know best and credit and debit get reestablished. There is nothing wrong with that. I guess the trouble starts when greed drives profit. Then we see modern forms of usury by financial institutions (credit card debt charges at over 23%, student loans compromising our children's future); we see environmental degradation; we see local market instability and economic refugees; scarcity of food and water in the most vulnerable spots of the Earth leading to despair and social upheaval of all intensity and degree.

Jesus' response to Peter seems to suggest to suspend the credit/debit system and promote generous living all the time. He is not merely talking against greed. Jesus is taking on the habitual reactivity to perceived wrong. He doesn't want us to be trapped in bouts of hatred, violence, and retribution. He wants us to live by the fundamental truth that we are all forgiven debtors encouraged to extend to our neighbor the kindness received.

Think about it: forgiving seventy times seven requires patience, perseverance, trust, benevolence.

We might agree to offer second chances. But seventy times seven? That sounds utterly insane! Our reaction to a repeated offense is revelatory of the limitation we impose on forgiveness. Our forgiveness is conditional. We forgive in the hope of affecting change and become exasperated if it

doesn't happen. Our patience gets tested and we soon reach its limit. We wonder if we are taken advantage of and even if we matter at all. If forgiveness means maintaining a relationship that does not seem to improve, we challenge the very concept and value of forgiveness.

But let's reverse the equation. Let's say we are the ones in need of forgiveness. We expect God to be patient with us and to offer unconditional love. Our ability to change is limited to the awareness we have of our wrongdoing. We may offer reparation for some of the things we do. But much of our unhealthy behavioral threads remain hidden deep in our unconscious, and those we interact with day in and day out are the unfortunate recipients of our repeated offenses.

So, if we were the ones committing infinite offenses, how would we want to be loved and forgiven? Besides being discouraged by our repeated failures at changing what we identify as the root causes of our behavior, what can we truly offer as a guarantee of our sincerity to wanting to change? Our word has become totally meaningless and trust all but consumed. Then, before we expect others to accept us as we are and welcome us back into a normalized relationship, we realize that we are not required to demonstrate we are worthy of love and trust. This realization allows us to accept ourselves and go deep inside to rediscover who we truly are and allow that true Self to blossom.

That true Self God loves and goes after. That true Self is the reason for God's perseverance and patience, for God's forgiveness and unconditional love. And it's only when we are in touch with that true Self and are faithful to that true Self that we are truly free. Once free, we realize that those who sin against us seventy times seven times are themselves oblivious to their own true Self. Sin is ignorance and to offer support to get in touch with one's true Self is the work of reconciliation. In fact, forgiveness paves the way to reconcile all things in God.¹

I am an expert in matter of sin. I have known the desperation of the slavery to sin. But God has been merciful to me. I have experienced God's unconditional love and infinite forgiveness tangibly in the love and forgiveness of my spouse, Stephanie. Nobody, not even the Church which claims to be an authority in matters of love and forgiveness has demonstrated to me that much love. God is truly the source of renewed life. And the untiring love of those who forgive us is a trustworthy sign that we can access our true Self and in faithfulness to that true Self we may experience the joy and freedom of forgiving others even as many times as seventy times seven.

May we all experience that joy and freedom.

¹ Colossians 1:20; 2 Corinthians 5:11.18