

When I was in junior high, I loved spending time with my best friend, Stephanie. We would spend time before and after school, and if we were lucky, we would spend the night at each other's houses. One Friday at school, Stephanie was so excited because her dad had just bought a new four wheeler. She wanted me to come spend the night that night, and then spend the day riding it with her on Saturday. So, after school, I went home and told my mom all about our plan. Well, you need to know that my mom was pretty over protective, and I didn't know a thing about driving a four wheeler. So, she told me I couldn't ride it, drive it, or anything. Well, as you can imagine, I was pretty disappointed. I really wanted to ride it. So, I decided that I would do it anyway, and my mom would never know. Easy, right? I packed up my stuff and headed to Stephanie's house. The next day, we started riding the four wheeler bright and early. We were having a blast. Stephanie asked me if I wanted to drive – of course, I did. So, she showed me what to do and I got on. I don't know what I did, but at one point I went to shift and I stood up at the same time. I quickly found out that parts of the four wheeler were really hot. You see, when I stood up, I burnt the

inside of my leg. It was bad, and I didn't know how I was going to hide this from my mom. Well, I went home that evening, and when I got home, my mom immediately noticed my leg and asked about it. I told her a great story...I told her Stephanie's dad had been cutting the lawn and while we were running around the yard, I climbed over the mower and burned my leg. Simple. I got away with it – well, that is until Stephanie's dad called and asked how I was doing and mentioned the four – wheeler. Needless to say, my mom was really angry with me and I thought she would never talk to me again. Well, I was grounded and eventually, even though, I didn't deserve it, she forgave me.

We've all messed up a time or two in our lives, haven't we? We all have been hurt or betrayed by someone a time or two, haven't we. We have all been in need of forgiveness, and we have all been in the position to grant the forgiveness. Forgiveness. It seems like such a simple concept, but it's just not as easy as it sounds.

In our gospel lesson today, Peter approaches Jesus and asks him how often he should forgive someone who has sinned against him. Peter offers seven times – probably thinking that seven times is a lot times to

forgive one person. Yet, Jesus told him, “Not seven times, but seventy times seven.” What? Forgive someone not once, not twice, but seventy times seven times? That seems impossible, doesn’t it? I mean take a moment and think about a time when someone hurt you. Was it easy to forgive?

Forgiveness is not an easy thing. We live in a society where revenge or getting even is more popular than forgiving someone. If someone hurts us, we often want to hurt them. But is forgiveness just about letting someone off the hook? Is it even about that at all?

I think sometimes when we think of forgiving someone, we think that we are saying that what someone did to us was ok. Yet that’s not what forgiveness is about at all.

Five Amish schoolgirls killed, 11 wounded, by a shooter in Pennsylvania, the headlines cried in 2006. The Amish community not only comforted the shooter’s wife and children, they forgave him. The Amish were reviled by many in the press because they forgave even as they mourned the death of their own innocent children.

In 1948, Pastor Yang-Won Sohn's two teenage boys were shot for being Christians by a rioter in Korea. Sohn not only forgave the shooter, but arranged his release from prison and adopted him.

Were these people crazy? How can people forgive such heinous crimes against innocents? It messes with our minds. Yes, Jesus said forgive, but there must be a limit, and these crazy people crossed it. We want killers punished. But Jesus said, forgive not seven times, but 70 times seven. OK, let's count it up; we must be way beyond that limit now. But if we're honest, we know when Jesus said "70 times seven" he was using it to mean "always." You must always forgive.

And then Jesus told a parable about the wicked slave who is forgiven a huge sum by his master, but then goes out and throws a fellow slave in prison for being owed just a fraction. We hear that the wicked slave then gets his just punishment. "Good," we may say. He surely deserved that! We might forget that he was punished not because he owed money, but because he didn't forgive. Jesus is very serious about this forgiveness thing.

This week, during chapel at the seminary, one of our professors, Dr. Sam Giere, preached about forgiveness. He talked about another time when Jesus teaches about forgiveness, when he is teaching the Lord's Prayer. You know the phrase – Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Dr. Giere pointed out how one small word can make such an impact. As. Forgive us AS we forgive others. What? Are we to believe that the forgiveness that we receive is dependent on how much we forgive? It's a hard truth to accept. Yet, what we do know for sure is forgiveness is important.

But why? Wouldn't be just easier to just hold grudges and hope that people get what's coming to them? I mean aren't we just letting people off the hook if we forgive them over and over. You see – forgiveness isn't about evening the playing field or letting someone off the hook – what it is about is you. When we forgive others, we don't hold grudges. We don't let resentments fester inside of us. We bring reconciliation to our homes and communities.

Forgiveness is important. I want to be clear though. Forgiveness does not mean that justice should not be served. Forgiveness doesn't

mean that a person should stay in an abusive situation or relationship that does not bring life and wholeness.

Forgiveness is intended to set us free. Forgiveness is intended to bring about reconciliation. Have there been times in your life when forgiveness has made an impact on your relationships? Are there places in your life where forgiveness might bring wholeness? Are there people or situations that you are having trouble forgiving?

Jesus says to forgive 70 times 7 – always. Jesus says we will be forgiven as we have forgiven. Yet, we know forgiveness is hard. It is natural to not want to forgive. I was talking to my 11 year old daughter this week about a problem she was having with a friend. I told her maybe she should forgive her friend. My daughter emphatically said to me – “I will forgive her this time and maybe one more time, but I draw the line at 3 times. No one hurts me three times and gets away with it!” Forgiveness is hard. It’s not easy, but it is a gift that frees each and every one of us.

Jesus forgives us when we don't deserve it. Where might there be opportunities in our life to bring forgiveness and wholeness to our world?