

A couple weeks ago I was hiking with Angus, when we come out of the woods onto a paved path, where he sniffs around and then does his business behind a bench. I'm squatting down, picking up after him when suddenly the leash goes taut and he yanks me backwards over the bench. I land inelegantly in the mud after scraping my leg hard enough that it's bleeding through my pants. He had pulled me over before I tied the bag shut, so the contents of that are on the leash, the dog, my pants, the bench. Once I realize I'm not really hurt, I look up to see what in the world could have spooked Angus into such a strong reaction, and I see a man, standing just an inch farther than the dog can reach as he's still straining at the leash. The man looks at me, still on my rear end in the mud, bleeding and covered in dog poo, and without a word, he just walks away. And I'm feeling pretty good about *not* saying all the things out loud that I really want to say as I continue to sit on the ground, checking my scrapes and bruises and using handiwipes to clean off the leash, the dog, my pants, the bench, while Angus sits beside me, now completely calm. But it could only have been four or five minutes later when I feel the dog tense up, so I get a good two-hand hold on his harness and look up to see that the man has turned around—on the loop trail—and is heading back, straight toward us, where again, saying nothing, he walks as close as he can get without touching the dog. I finish cleaning up, and Angus and I walk until we're in sight of the car, when, you guessed it, the man, who has yet again doubled back on the loop trail, is heading our way. I pull Angus off the path and straight through the picnic area to the car. Now, the initial crash was certainly an accident; how could anyone know what would happen if they snuck up on a big dog on bright orange leash attached to an owner who was bending down, balancing in the mud, and facing the opposite direction? And who would expect that person to say anything at all after watching such an accident happen right in front of them? And surely that person shouldn't feel obligated to go even a few steps out of their way to avoid it happening again? But by the third pass, I was getting real close to saying something not very pastoral. I don't think I would have made it to the 70some more times that Jesus says I have to forgive.

Peter seems to be fishing for praise when he asks if he should forgive as many as seven times. Clearly he understands that mercy is a value in the kingdom of heaven—and that's no small thing, considering that we live in a society where forgiving someone instead of getting revenge is considered a weakness; but it's also clear that Peter believes mercy should have limits. When Jesus answers, not seven times, but seventy-seven times (or in some translations, seventy times seven times) he is not giving Peter a limit, not even a lofty one. He is telling Peter to forgive as many times as it takes: mercy between people in the kingdom of heaven has no limitations because God's mercy has no limitations.

In Jesus' story, the king forgives a slave who owes a ridiculous amount of money, something like \$6 billion of our dollars. We could wonder both how the slave managed to rack up that much debt and who he thought he was kidding when he claimed he would repay it, since each of the 10,000 talents he owed was equivalent to about 20 years of wages. That's quite a lot of patience he's asking of the king. But like forgiving 77 times, the amount is not the point, beyond recognizing that he is forgiven a huge debt while he refuses to forgive his fellow slave a comparatively tiny amount—100 days worth of wages compared to the 200,000 years worth of wages that he owes. The other slaves are distressed by his hypocrisy and injustice and report him; and the king punishes him not because of his massive debt but because he failed to *give* even a little bit of mercy when he had *received* so much more mercy himself. Jesus doesn't seem to expect us to live without sinning; Jesus *does* expect that we will forgive others their sins (or we might say debts or trespasses) in recognition of the forgiveness we ourselves have received from God.

This is one of those passages that has been misused to coerce victims of abuse into staying in harmful situations, as if some people's lot in life is to forgive while others have license to offend. But nothing in the gospels as a whole or in this story in particular excuses sin or approves of people committing it. On the contrary, scripture consistently lifts up those who are on the losing end of power dynamics. In this parable, the community and the king agree that the slave's abusive treatment of his debtor—grabbing him by the throat and throwing him into prison—is a much bigger problem than his financial debt. The concern is always for reconciliation and *mutually* loving relationships.

Did you ever think Peter needs to get better friends if his are going to sin against him 77 times? Honestly, I put distance between myself and people who seem to be *trying* to sin against me that much—not just on the hiking trail but in the rest of life. But what if our struggle is not forgiving 77 sins that someone committed against us? What if our struggle is forgiving that one thing that someone did that we replay in our minds 77 times? Whether it really is so many different offenses that we've lost count or just that one transgression that keeps on angering us every time we think of it, we're still called to forgive—not because what happened to us didn't hurt, not because the person who did it showed sufficient contrition or made it up to us, not even to free ourselves from anger and resentment, although that's a bonus. We forgive because we have been forgiven. Nobody, and certainly not our all-knowing God, thinks we're going to be perfect; but Jesus does ask us to act with humility—not hypocrisy—to show each other grace. May God who showers us with mercy help us sprinkle a little mercy on others.