

## “Finding the Larger Story”

Rev. David Gregory  
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Pentecost 15



### Readings

(Peter asked), “How many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?”  
Jesus replied, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.

~ Matthew 18:21-22 from *the Message* by Eugene Peterson

To forgive is to put oneself in a larger gravitational field of experience than the one that first seemed to hurt us. We reimagine ourselves in the light of our maturity and we reimagine the past in the light of our new identity; we allow ourselves to be gifted by a story larger than the story that first hurt us and left us bereft.

~ From *Consolations* by David Whyte

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This is an extraordinary time, and our prayers and good wishes are with all of the firefighters, first responders, rescue workers and volunteers who are doing everything super-humanly possible to protect all forms of life that may be in harm’s way. All of this while a global pandemic rages among us, claiming a thousand lives a day in the United States alone. A couple of days ago, we marked the nineteenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks with the grim reminder from that devastating day all those years ago, that we are losing roughly the same number of lives to the pandemic every three days. There’s just no way for the human mind to comprehend something so large, so vast, so all-encompassing. It requires a larger view of things than may be available to us right at the moment.

Right now, most of us are focused on caring for ourselves and our families, making sure that we have a roof over our heads and food in the cupboards. Our attention is given to doing what we need to do to stay healthy day by day. It's not an easy time to take the long view of anything. But that doesn't mean we cannot try. Today's gospel reading is in the form of a dialogue between Peter and Jesus on the subject of forgiveness. While we'll never know what was in Peter's mind when he asked the question about how many times to forgive, chances are good that it wasn't with a longer view in mind. Maybe he'd experienced a disagreement with one of the other disciples. It might have been about some hurt feelings, maybe a sin of omission or an encroachment. Someone had been disrespectful to him, or taken something that belonged to him. Whatever the offense was, Peter had been taught to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Give us forgiveness by the same measure that we forgive others. And as we all know, this can be a tall order. Must I roll over and play dead? Do I need to continually tolerate this wrong? Am I a slave to someone else's bad behavior? Just what is the line here, and how am I supposed to find it?

I don't think I've met another human being who hasn't struggled with this very question. It can be an accumulation of petty annoyances or it can be a deep wound from long ago, and for whatever reason, we simply cannot find a way past it. Peter was thinking that forgiving someone seven times might be considered a herculean effort. Who would argue with that? No one would blame you if on the eighth instance you just let it fly. No, Peter, you can take your seven instances of forgiveness and you can multiply that by seventy. I don't think Jesus was just setting a higher number; he was offering an indefinite one. You just keep on forgiving. It's what you do now. This is your way of life. This is what love does. Later on, Paul the apostle would remind the people of Corinth that "love keeps no record of wrongs." This is the deepest grace of the one who loves, to be able to say, "Forgive them; they know not what they do."

This is an ideal way to live, and like most of our highest ideals we often view them as nice things to think about, but otherwise unattainable. Once we are glued to this offense or injury, it has become our point of attraction and we can only recognize more of the same. As with the smoke outside our windows, our view of everything is blocked. From my office window, I can normally look across the bay and see the boats that are docked in Sausalito, but as I work my way through this message, I can see nothing of the kind—nothing beyond the stone wall at the edge of the church yard. Everything beyond it is under a blanket of smoke and hidden from view. So the only way to see beyond the smoke is to get above it. This is when our modern prophets and poets can help us the most, by making the impossible accessible.

In what has become one of our familiar sacred writings, *Consolations* by David Whyte gives us an access point for forgiveness that may have otherwise eluded us. It's as if he's inviting us to come back and take another look at something we might have missed. He says that to forgive is to receive a gift. The gift is of a larger story than the one that hurt us. When we can look at someone and get past the blanket of smoke that the offense has created, and when we can see that soul in the context of the person's entire life, and when we can become conscious of his or her pain and acknowledge its source within the person, it brings us to a place where we can get a better view. When we ask ourselves how Jesus could forgive his executioners in the midst of the execution, it's because he was well practiced in this larger story of who they were.

Occasionally we see family members in a courtroom offering forgiveness to someone who murdered their loved one. They have received the gift of a larger story. In 2006, when an Amish community in Pennsylvania offered forgiveness to the one who took the lives of their young girls in a school shooting, they had received the gift of a larger story. The facts did not change. Those girls were not coming back. The Amish community wasn't ignoring the horrific wrong that had been inflicted, but they chose to see it in a larger context. I'm not saying it's an easy thing to do, but it is possible, and it is preferable, and it is infinitely more loving toward ourselves and others when we can reimagine the past in light of our new identity—the one that is called love.



*The Return of the Prodigal Son (detail)*  
Rembrandt