You may have noticed that most of the time I enjoy talking about the abundance of God’s mercy. If you have ever once listened to a sermon of mine, you pretty much know that. The Gospel for today is not actually any different— there is no question that God is merciful. The pattern or at least the focus that changes slightly today is that your behavior matters to God. Although one could argue that your behavior always matters, it is drawn into sharp focus in this Gospel.

There are a few things in the Gospel passage that probably need clarifying or considering first. The first lines of the Gospel when Peter asked “how often do we need to forgive?” is met with an interesting answer. Isn’t it funny that Peter asks the question? It seems to be human nature (even for disciples) to not want to forgive. Almost all of us like to store our hurts. There is almost a tendency to want to do the opposite of the Golden Rule. “Do unto others as you think they did to you.” Jesus’s response is nuanced with many layers. The Greek can be read as either seventy-seven or seven times seven. As is the way with most numbers in the Bible, you can read this to mean, a really big number, so practically endlessly, just keep on forgiving. The other layer to this is that seven is thought to be a holy number, as in the seventh day is the Sabbath. Thus, this number is from God. It represents perfect forgiveness. This is how God forgives, completely. That is to be our aim, the standard by which we measure our own forgiveness of others.

Of course, we are not really at that perfection of forgiving yet. Instead, we like to keep track of the ways we’ve been hurt, and the second part of the Gospel addresses that place in humanity that so likes to store hurts. Back in the day, when one committed an offense, one was fined, and if you couldn’t pay it back, you were put in prison until your family paid it off. This is why the Lord’s prayer can be rendered or translated as “forgive us our debts” or “forgive us our sins” and probably has more real meaning to us now than “forgive us our trespasses.” In some ways, the recitation of the traditional 17th century version of the prayer is enshrined as a holy prayer, but its meaning is less clear than the ecumenical, contemporary language version. Really looking closely at the Lord’s prayer is an exercise for another day, but this still gives us the back story of this story. Offenses and currency were intricately tied up together, and in some sense are interchangeable.

So, they are tied together, but of course in this sense, Jesus is speaking metaphorically. “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.” Think of the sins as something owed, which can be pardoned—like a debt. God’s forgiveness is vast, maybe infinite, at least too big to count, much like the amount of money that the slave who pleaded with the king to have his debt pardoned. And yet that same slave who is pardoned stores his hurts, against his fellow slave— he throws him in prison because he can’t pay something back not nearly so vast. He holds onto those sins of the fellow slave very tightly.

There is a question that comes out of this. Personally I think it’s actually a good question. Why, why would God care if you forgive others? What is the gain from forgiveness? First, remember that forgiving does not mean forgetting, so it’s not as if the offense never happened. What it does is open up your heart, it’s as if it never happened in your heart. Perhaps the best example would be to imagine if you were ever jailed, and you are not able to forgive your captor, then in a sense you are still in jail. Applying that to other sins puts things in perspective. In some sense, it’s probably why the expression “time heals all wounds,” makes any sense at all. Even if you can’t right after the injustice willfully forgive another, because there are some things that just don’t seem to budge in terms of forgiving… even when you can’t get there, time helps. Time allows the heart to open, and just like when you open a fist, it allows the things held there so tightly to tumble out, makes room for love to tumble in.

The thing about forgiveness is that it is good not just for the person who is forgiven, it’s actually good for the person who does the forgiving. It gives some inner peace to move past an injury. Physiologically it is better for your health as well.

Yet there are so many compelling reasons why a person struggles to forgive. For instance if a marriage or any relationship is abusive, it is extremely hard to get to a place of forgiveness until one is out of the situation. If there is trauma involved in any way, any revisit of that trauma leads to a conditioned response. We are wired that way. And yet, with that same wiring, it seems to be God’s desire for us to have peace, for the wires to quit going over the same worn circuit.

Now as we read in Paul’s letter to the Romans today, just as there are Christians who eat everything and those that are vegetarians, so too there are those who are better at forgiving than others and those who are not. And there are those who seem to feel or pick up on a slight very easily and those that don’t. We are all different, but as we turn back to today’s Gospel, what matters is where we stand with God.

So, not only do we need to ask God’s forgiveness for how we have erred and gone like lost sheep, but we are to ask God’s help in allowing us to forgive. It is a two way street this road to forgiveness, but it’s a road to a healthier world and a healthier you. The process is not comfortable, but it is transformative. Just like a physical wound, an emotional and spiritual wound takes time to heal and it is painful. So getting to God’s peace, which passes all understanding, is not a peaceful process, but it is through the gift of grace from God that allows us to be forgiven AND allows us to forgive others.

You can think of it this way that God gave you a gift of life, and if you make it harder and less full because you hold onto the past hurts so tightly, you diminish the gift. It’s kind of an insult to God.

So forgiveness is one way of being Christ, one way that we don’t often talk about. Yet, it is no accident that Christ forgave from the cross. When we answer the call to be Christ in the world, we answer the call to be Christians, we answer the call to forgive.