

## PENTECOST: A TIME TO BE FILLED WITH GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT

**Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**September 11, 2011**

**Genesis 50:15-21**

**Psalm 103:[1-7] 8-13**

**Romans 14:1-12**

**Matthew 18:21-35**

### **How Many Times?**

This week's Gospel text begins with the disciple Peter approaching Jesus with a somewhat provocative question. He wants to know how many times he should forgive someone who sins against him. Some of us may be thinking, well, surely once is enough. But Peter, offering what he probably considered to be a generous answer, proposed "seven times." Imagine his reaction to Jesus' response: "No, not seven times, but seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22, *GNT*).

While Peter's answer suggests quantifying or establishing limits on forgiveness, Jesus' pronouncement points to forgiveness that is repeated and not bound by mathematical calculations. The psalmist writes, "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our sins from us" (103:12, *GNT*). God lavishly offers us undeserved and unlimited mercy and forgiveness. "The LORD's unfailing love and mercy still continue, fresh as the morning, as sure as the sunrise" (Lamentations 3:22, 23, *GNT*).

Following the exchange between Peter and Jesus, Jesus proceeds to teach about forgiveness by means of a parable about the kingdom of heaven. While the king in the story exhibits mercy at the outset and forgives the servant his debt, the parable ends with a twist whereby the king reverses his initial action and orders the servant to be punished because the servant had refused to forgive a fellow servant.

That's justice, right? After all, that first servant got what he deserved since he failed to extend mercy to another after having received mercy from the king. And Jesus concludes the parable by stating that we can expect to be treated by God in the same way if we do not forgive others from our heart (Matthew 18:35). Even though the first servant was a recipient of the king's mercy, he chose not to reciprocate according to the grace he had received. However, other members of the community witnessed the injustice and reported the situation to the king (verse 31) who then meted out judgment on the offender.

Unlimited or repeated forgiveness is key to peaceful life in community. Pericopes from the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans these past two weeks have focused on life in community (12:9-21; 13:8-14), and this week's text from chapter 14 continues this

theme. We are to avoid judging one another over divisive petty issues and live in ways that are pleasing to God to whom we are accountable. It is such acts of merciful reconciling that identify us as Christians, bind us together, and help us to live peaceably with one another. The concluding chapter in Genesis in this week's Old Testament text depicts a scene of reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers (50:15-21) in which he demonstrates forgiveness, and harmony within the family is restored.

The parable this week is a teaching about the kingdom of heaven and God's ruling activity. Why should we forgive? Each of us is a recipient of God's lavish mercy and grace. Dare we recall how many times we have violated God's laws and needed to repent and received God's forgiveness? How will we answer if we are asked, "How many times did you forgive others?"

On this particular Sunday, as we pause to remember the tragic events that took place ten years ago in New York City, Washington, DC, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania, we are reminded of our constant need for God's healing love. We remember those who lost their lives on that tragic day, their loved ones who still grieve and live with the heartbreaking pain of loss, and the many since who died and suffered in the aftermath of these events.

Sadly, acts of terrorism have continued throughout the world and, in the words of the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. prophet Habakkuk, we too cry out to God, "O LORD, how long must I call for help before you listen, before you save us from this violence? ... How can you stand to look on such wrongdoing?" (Habakkuk 1:2, 3b, *GNT*). Yet Scripture assures us that the LORD "watches people everywhere and knows what they are doing" (Psalm 11:4b, *GNT*). Yes, the LORD hears our cries, and the response to us is as it was to Habakkuk, "Those who are evil will not survive, but those who are righteous will live because they are faithful to God" (Habakkuk 2:4b, *GNT*).

We have God's promise that evil will not survive. In these days of uncertainty and conflict, we place our trust and hope in God's "unfailing love and mercy" for healing and comfort. And we pray with assurance in the words of Habakkuk, "The Sovereign LORD gives me strength" (3:19a, *GNT*).

*This week's Reflection was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel who, until retirement, served on the staff of American Bible Society as Director of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship. Barbara continues as a consultant to ABS.*

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**This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Morocco** – with thanks to God for continued guidance; and with prayers that the authorities will allow the Society to import much needed Scriptures, for the success of the audio New Testament, and that the printed version will be launched towards the end of this year and used in Moroccan Arabic; also pray for the safety of the translation team as they work on the Old Testament, and for everyone involved in this major project; **Algeria** – with thanks to God that more people are attending church and that the Society is able to produce Scriptures within the country; and with prayers for courage to face the many

challenges and opportunities, that more Scriptures will be made available, and that the Society will gain the freedom to import Scriptures; also pray for protection for the staff and volunteers as they continue in Bible work; **Tunisia** – with thanks to God for Bible work in this country and that Scripture needs are met by the ASC; also with thanks that many Tunisian believers enjoy considerable freedom; and with prayers that they will continue to enjoy the freedom to meet and worship as the large expatriate community does; also pray for peace, for the efforts to serve the needs of many migrants currently trapped in North Africa, and that the much desired Scriptures can be supplied.

**Activity Corner:** “Forgiveness: 7 x 7”

Supplies needed: Bible; writing paper; pens/pencils

Read together Psalm 103:1-13 and discuss what it means to be loved and forgiven by God. Then read Luke 15:11-32 (The Parable of the Prodigal Son). Who asked to be forgiven? Who offered forgiveness? At the end of the story, was there anyone who needed to seek forgiveness? Encourage participants to discuss how the story might end.

Across a sheet of writing paper, copy verse 13 from Psalm 103. Underneath, write the word FORGIVENESS. Setting a limit of 7 minutes, ask everyone to write as many words as they can think of using the letters in the word FORGIVENESS. Words must have at least three letters; letters in the word FORGIVENESS can be used only once; making plural forms of a word (by adding the letter “s”) does not count. After the 7 minutes are up, extend the time for another 7 minutes. Challenge everyone to come up with at least 49 words (7 x 7). Conclude by saying Psalm 103:13 as a closing prayer.