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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA
September 13, 2020
Year A, Proper 19, Revised Common Lectionary, Track 2
[Genesis 50:15-21](#)
[Psalm 103:\(1-7\), 8-13](#)
[Romans 14:1-12](#)
[Matthew 18:21-35](#)

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There's a story about how violence entered the world.

It's a pretty well-known story. It's from the Bible, near the very beginning. It's the story of Cain and Abel, the first two children born to Adam and Eve. Cain comes to believe that God likes Abel better than him. So he takes Abel out to a field, attacks him, and kills him.

God doesn't kill Cain in return. But Cain has to go into exile. He protests to God that he'll be a target, and God gives him a promise: anyone who kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold retribution.

Now there's a follow-up to the Cain story, and it's not nearly as well-known. It's just a few verses later in Genesis, and it's just a short snippet about Cain's great-great-great-grandson, Lamech. We don't know anything about Lamech except for a boastful song he sings to his wives, and it's a song about retribution: "For wounding me I have killed a man, for striking me I have killed a young man. Seven times is Cain avenged, but Lamech seventy-seven."

From sevenfold vengeance to seventy-seven in just five generations: the cycle of vengeance intensifies. And so it goes down through human history. Violence leads to retaliation. Victims, or their offspring, become perpetrators.

Back in 2009 Julia and I visited the Holy Land. On our first day there, on our first walk outside our hostel in Tel Aviv, on a gorgeous beach we passed a monument commemorating 21 young people who were killed in a suicide bombing in 2001. Since 1948 when the state of Israel was established there have been at least eight official wars and countless acts of violence. The devastating loss of a Palestinian homeland generations ago is magnified not only by crushing poverty but also by every death of a child who throws a stone at an Israeli tank. The traumatic experience of attack at the moment of Israel's birth is magnified by every experience of a suicide bombing. When you've been harmed, it is easy to find a justification for taking revenge.

Have you ever had a crack in your car windshield, and left it too long without getting it repaired? It lengthens imperceptibly. Then it splits and multiplies. Soon the entire windshield is covered by a spiderweb of cracks, multiplying from the first one: sevenfold; seventy-sevenfold.

That's what the cycle of violence is like. It's a crack in the universe we live in. It's a fracture. The great mythological language of Genesis traces it back to the disobedience of Adam and Eve, followed by the envious murder done by Cain, followed by the boastful violence of Lamech, followed by ... followed by ...

It's no accident, in our gospel story today, that we hear these numbers again. How many times should I forgive, asks Peter: seven times? And when Jesus says, no, not seven but seventy-seven, he's not talking as if we could use a handheld counter to click off sins until finally we reach the cutoff point. There's a greater significance to these numbers because there's a greater significance to what Jesus is doing, to what he's come into the world to accomplish. He's come into the world to start a new cycle—not a cycle of violence but a cycle of grace. He's come to heal the fracture that's been multiplying since the beginning—as if we could take a video of the crack in the windshield and play it in reverse until the glass is whole once again. Jesus is offering us an alternative to the song of Lamech with its boasting and retribution. He's offering us the way of grace; the way of forgiveness.

There are a lot of misconceptions about what forgiveness means. Sometimes we hear exhortations for people to forgive those who have wronged them, and what's really happening is a desire not to upset the status quo; to go back to an unjust or unsafe or abusive situation. We ought to be suspicious whenever we hear someone with more power preaching to someone with less power about how beautiful and essential forgiveness is. But true forgiveness isn't condoning an evil. Actually true forgiveness requires naming exactly the evil of what has been done—otherwise there's nothing to forgive. True forgiveness isn't forgetting what has happened. True forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean trust. We can forgive a person for the wrong they've done while realizing it still isn't wise to put them in a position where they can hurt us in the same way again.

And true forgiveness doesn't take away the wrongdoer's responsibility to acknowledge what's happened, to make a true apology, and to do whatever's possible to make amends. Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes, "If someone steals my pen and then asks me to forgive him, unless he returns my pen the sincerity of his contrition and confession will be considered to be nil. Confession, forgiveness, and reparation form part of a continuum."¹ Bishop Tutu and the Black people of South Africa had had much more than a pen taken from them. Without amends—true, substantial amends—the wrongdoer can never truly receive the benefits of the forgiveness that's granted. Their responsibility doesn't go away.

¹ *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 273.

But we can forgive others even in the absence of an apology, even in the absence of amends. We can forgive even while continuing to fight for justice. Because forgiveness is a choice: the choice not to seek revenge. It's the choice to halt the cycle of retaliation, the cycle of violence. It's the choice to fight physical power with spiritual power; the choice, when we have been wounded, not to wound back in return.

We are in a time when self-appointed vigilantes are arming themselves to take justice into their own hands on the streets of this country. We are in a time when the cycle of violence seems at risk of spinning out of control. And in fact spinning out of control is the natural thing that violence does. But there is another path.

Those of us who are disciples of Jesus have seen a power that's more powerful than retaliation. Even from the cross Jesus prays for forgiveness for those who are crucifying him. And now in his glorious resurrected life he invites even his enemies to let go of hatred, be cleansed from evil, and join in the heavenly banquet. We can choose to accept God's invitation into a cycle of grace, to become the recipient of God's overflowing generosity and to share it in turn with all around us. Or we can choose to stay imprisoned in Cain and Lamech's cycle of violence, exacting retribution from those we hate, only to receive it multiplied in return.

Which cycle will we live in? Will we further the splintering of God's creation? Or will we follow Jesus into the patient, powerful, work of healing the world?