

Christian Formation Begins with Worship
Psalm 103:1—13; Matthew 18:21—35

Maybe you're familiar with this chain of events. The Board of Directors writes a sternly-worded reprimand to the boss of a local franchise; the cost-analysis data are in; and the company's in the red. The boss then takes out his frustration on the manager. The manager then reams out one of his underling-employees. And when that employee drives home, he's impatient with the traffic and cuts someone off on the highway. That person, now angry for being cut off, eventually makes it home and yells at her spouse. The spouse then screams at the child who had come from school, having been reprimanded by the principal. The child then kicks the dog for being underfoot. And the dog then goes outside and pounces on the neighbor's cat. One thing leads another. And it seems like there's no way to break the chain. And yet, I wonder...

Peter, in conversation with Jesus, doesn't believe things have to be this way. As a fisherman, with a wife and a mother-in-law back at home in Capernaum, and with taxes being siphoned off to Rome on every catch of fish, he's very familiar with how people are prone to act and to react. And yet, to his credit, he appears to have kept up on the prophet Amos, in which God allows for *"three transgressions"* without punishing the offending party. And, under the influence of Jesus, Peter has doubled that number and added one—to make seven: *"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"* And, you see, he probably thinks he's being overly generous. He probably thinks he's allocating forgiveness according to a standard that Jesus himself would have laid down. But maybe not. In verse 22 Jesus replies, *"Not seven times, but I tell you seventy-seven times."*

Now, that's sort of a joke; and we might imagine Jesus winking at Peter as he says it. He could have said *a gazillion and seven...* or *seven times a seventy trillion...* or *seven quadrillion to the seventh power...* or *seven times seven infinity...* And the point Jesus is making isn't a decimal point; it's a point that has no finite measurability; it's a point that blows away all precise calculations. On the other hand, if you're wondering where else in the Bible the number seven is thrown around with such abandon, look no further than the so-called *Year of Jubilee*, which is mentioned in Leviticus, chapters 25 through 27. Here's an excerpt:

8 “You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. 9 Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the Day of Atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land.”

And then, guess what's supposed to happen. What was supposed to happen during the *Year of Jubilee* is pretty unruly; and that is, everyone's financial obligations were to be forgiven; and consequently if there were properties that had been foreclosed upon, that land would be returned to the original owners for free; if there were persons who had become indentured servants because they couldn't pay their debts, they weren't slaves anymore. As of the fiftieth year (after seven times seven years) the God of Israel says so. It's an executive order! A total reset before God—not in heaven after everyone's dead—but in this all too human, mortal life. So what do you say? Might we give the *Year of Jubilee* a try in the fall of 2026? [Pause]. Don't worry. I'm not expecting a serious answer. And, in Matthew 18, based upon the way Jesus throws his outrageous numbers around, I don't think he is either. Even so, it's probably worth checking into.

Can we really forgive people their *debts to us*, their financial, social, spiritual and emotional trespasses against us—without keeping tabs on how much might be too much?

In one of my chaplaincy meetings at *Sacred Heart*, there were four of us who periodically got together and discussed various concerns with various patients. And one of the other chaplains used to play these amazing classical pieces on the piano to unwind. I started teasing him, asking if he could play any ‘Hip-Hop’ music instead. And it was as simple as that. Another chaplain, however, flinched. She was an African American woman, who happened to love ‘Hip-Hop’—and she wondered why I would disrespect or denigrate the style of music that she savored all her life. And I looked at her, and I thought: *she’s got to be joking*. She couldn’t have been offended by that incidental comment. (And if I were to add up all the times in my life when I’ve made such comments, that number would be ridiculous.). But she was. She was. And until I took the time to understand why it hurt her FROM MY GUT, and until she could forgive me for that hurt FROM HER GUT, we couldn’t move on.

The practice of forgiveness, of course, is at the crux of what it means to be formed as a Christian. And it’s going to be my argument that we don’t appreciate the nuances or the dynamics of forgiveness without the worshipful encounter that’s described in Psalm 103:

***“Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.
Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”***

You see, that's no joke. And what I'm saying is without a worshipful encounter like that neither you nor I will have the inner resources—that *'FROM THE GUT' COMPASSION*—to offer the same *flow* of forgiveness, which is central to Christian formation—as in *"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."* And without taking those words seriously what we'll do is blow it off. We'll say to ourselves, 'It's no big deal' or we'll say, 'I didn't mean anything by it.' Or, 'O my God, she's being too sensitive.' Or, 'O my God, he needs to toughen up.' Worship, you see, ought to call those little micro-aggressions out. And if you don't believe that God cares very much for these interpersonal peccadilloes, listen to Isaiah 29:13—14.

***"Because these people draw near with their mouths
and honor me with their lips
while their hearts are far from me,
and their worship of me is a human commandment
learned by rote—
so I will again do amazing things with this people,
shocking and amazing.
The wisdom of their wise shall perish,
and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden."***

Similarly, in Jeremiah 7:2—4, we read about how people are taking refuge in the Jerusalem temple and congratulating themselves on the sacrifices of lambs and other livestock:

"... Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'"

And so, if we wanted to, if we were really intrigued with worship, we could ask ourselves here at Northwood Presbyterian: to what extent are we taking taking refuge and congratulating ourselves for belonging to this familiar group of like-minded people, but not really, not really, asking God to form us into the FORGIVING COMMUNITY that Jesus has in mind?

“I pardon you...” These are the words of the S.S. officer, the commandant of a Nazi prison camp, from the film, *Schindler’s List*. And what’s so striking is how he utters this pardon *for himself* as he’s gazing at his own face in his bathroom mirror. Will it work? Can he pardon himself? Well, If you’ve seen this Steven Spielberg classic, you know it won’t work and he can’t pardon himself. But the reason he tries is that this business tycoon, by the name of Oskar Schindler, has manipulated him during a night of binge drinking. Schindler, who had profited off of the cheap labor of the Jews, had begun to seek their forgiveness; but as he watches the S.S. officer kill people at random, he suggests to him that “true power” is the power to pardon—to pardon even the most worthless slaves, and even the most worthless, subhuman, dirty Jews. But, of course, the problem is they’re *NOT* worthless, subhuman or dirty Jews. Despite everything, they are God’s chosen people, and on their lips are the words of worship: BARUCH ATTAI ADONAI...

*“Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name...”*

*The Lord works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed...*

*He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.”*

The S.S. officer, you see, has never worshipped. Not like this. He’s never been exposed to even the possibility of a God who has compassion FROM THE GUT.

Last Thursday, I attended what's called a *Presbytery Summit*, which took place in the old facility where, for many years, Westminster Presbyterian Church had worshipped. The building is now being renovated for the sake a new ministry to children and adults with special, developmental needs. But it's not just for those we might consider 'slow' or 'mentally-challenged.' It's not just for those with Downs Syndrome, or who maneuver with electronic wheelchair. *Side By Side* is the name given to this ministry, because its pastor, David Sittser, doesn't just hope for people of great or average abilities to condescend and to show pity for those with disabilities. His Spirit-inspired dream is that people of all abilities will worship and serve 'side by side.'

And so, I'm there, at 512 South Bernard, standing up and sitting down in worship, being led by voices that I've rarely listened to, and sometimes tolerated. And, in the midst of a reading of Psalm 103—***"Blessed the Lord, O my soul and all that is within me..."*** I remember that David Sittser is the son of Gerry Sittser, a retired professor at *Whitworth University*. And then, I remember how David lost his mother, his grandmother and his sister in a horrific car accident that happened on the Nez Perce reservation in 1991. And so, here's the question: if the driver of the car that killed David's and Jerry's family members had been drinking, and if that vehicle hit them going in excess of 85 miles per hour, and if the driver was somehow acquitted, how is David up there, *side by side*, with the most vulnerable people, loving them, leading them, praying with them? Where does that compassion come from? Does one thing have to lead to another? Has the chain been broken?