

### **Exodus 14:19–31**

<sup>19</sup>The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them.

<sup>20</sup>It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

<sup>21</sup>Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided.

<sup>22</sup>The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. <sup>23</sup>The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. <sup>24</sup>At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. <sup>25</sup>He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

<sup>26</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." <sup>27</sup>So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. <sup>28</sup>The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. <sup>29</sup>But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. <sup>30</sup>Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. <sup>31</sup>Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

### **Exodus 15:1b –11, 20–21 (UMH 135)**

<sup>14</sup>"I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

<sup>2</sup>The LORD is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him.

<sup>3</sup>The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name.

<sup>4</sup>"Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea; his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea.

<sup>5</sup>The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone.

<sup>6</sup>Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power— your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy.

<sup>7</sup>In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries; you sent out your fury, it consumed them like stubble.

<sup>8</sup>At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up, the floods stood up in a heap; the deeps

congealed in the heart of the sea.

<sup>9</sup>The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.’

<sup>10</sup>You blew with your wind, the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters.

<sup>11</sup>“Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders

<sup>20</sup>Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. <sup>21</sup>And Miriam sang to them: “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

### **Romans 14:1–12**

<sup>1</sup>Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. <sup>2</sup>Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. <sup>3</sup>Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. <sup>4</sup>Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. <sup>5</sup>Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. <sup>6</sup>Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. <sup>7</sup>We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. <sup>8</sup>If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. <sup>9</sup>For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. <sup>10</sup>Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. <sup>11</sup>For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” <sup>12</sup>So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

### **Matthew 18:21–35**

<sup>21</sup>Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. <sup>23</sup>“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup>When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup>and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup>So the slave fell on his knees before

him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'<sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.<sup>28</sup> But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.'<sup>29</sup> Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'<sup>30</sup> But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.<sup>31</sup> When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.<sup>32</sup> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.<sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'<sup>34</sup> And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.<sup>35</sup> So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

**The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Apocrypha**

## Seventy times Seven

Nine year old Joey was asked by his mother what he had learned in Sunday School. *“Well Mom, our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. When he got to the Red Sea, he had his engineers build a pontoon bridge and all the people walked across safely. Then he used his walkie-talkie to radio headquarters for reinforcements. They sent bombers to blow up the bridge and all the Israelites were saved.”*

*“Now Joey, is that really what your teacher taught you?”* his mother asked.

*“Well, no, Mom. But if I told it the way the teacher did, you’d never believe it!”*

Do you find that you get an image in your mind in response to something you hear, and that every time you hear it - the same image comes back? That is the way I am, and I suspect that other people are the same way.

Back in the early 1980's, about the same time I first got married, MTV became popular. My wife and I were newlyweds and we were too poor to have cable TV, or even a decent television set for that matter. But I really wanted to see music videos. (That was back when MTV showed music videos pretty much continuously.) I had to settle for occasional shows on the broadcast channels that showed music videos.

One time when I was watching music videos, my wife remarked that she didn't like them that much. That surprised me, since I *did* like them. I thought that maybe she didn't like the racy images in some of the music videos. Anyway, I asked her why she didn't like music videos. She said, “I don't like them because after you see them, every time you hear that song you see the images from the video. I would rather see the images that I thought of when I hear the music, rather than the ones from the video” And she was right about that.

Hearing the reading from Exodus this morning, I have certain images in my mind - and you might have the same images in your mind. Does Moses look like Charlton Heston to you? Does Pharoah Ramses look like Yul Brynner? You know you are a real movie fan if Joshua looks like John Derek and Aaron looks like John Carradine.

The movie “The Ten Commandments” probably forms the mental image of most people of the Israelites' escape from Egypt, except maybe for little Joey. But you can't blame Joey. Even with Hollywood special effects to create the walls of water and the pillars of smoke, the story of Israelite Exodus can seem to be hard to believe in places.

The Exodus story is a part of the oral tradition of the Israelites. It was told countless times around campfires and dinner tables for hundreds or even thousands of years before it was ever written down in its present form in the Old Testament. I can forgive the Israelites for embellishing the story, if it *is* embellished, because everyone wants to hear an interesting and exciting story.

Because this story - like so many from the Old Testament - is about answering questions. Who, what, where, how, and why questions. Who are the Israelites? Where did we come from? Why has God chosen us as His People? How are we supposed to behave toward God and each other? These questions were important to the Israelites, and should be important to us, more so than the literal historical accuracy of the events depicted in the stories.

Anna Grant-Henderson of the Uniting Church of Australia tells about the most important lesson for her from the story of the Exodus. *The . . . verses are a very profound theological creed: God saves, the people see and they believe. This is a major tenet of the Jewish faith that God's promises, which began with Abraham in Genesis . . . and this event is crucial in the forming of them as a nation on the way to the promised land. It is true for us all that our seeing and experience is that which enables us to have and grow in faith. No matter whether we have grown up in the church all our lives there comes a point when a person has to see and experience for themselves the saving acts of God in Jesus Christ and claim their own faith.*

Today is the fourth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C. in which over three thousand Americans were killed. It's a coincidence that today's Lectionary scripture reading from Matthew talks about forgiveness. Or maybe it isn't.

I don't know for sure, but it seems to me that life has become more abrasive since 9/11. People's tempers seem to be shorter than they used to be. We're more defensive. We get our feelings hurt or become angry more easily than we used to. For all the outpourings of love and sympathy after 9/11, we appear to be dealing increasingly with the darker side of our existence. A United Nations official from India says that this has been his observation too. Even at the international level, he says, there is far more defensiveness and suspicion than there used to be.

If ever there was a time when we need that—when we need to forgive and be forgiven—it's now. Now, when the world is so suspicious and uptight about everything. Now, when anxiety has made us all edgy and nervous. Now, when it's even fashionable to hate certain people — especially people of particular backgrounds. We need the cleansing power of forgiveness.

I don't know if you ever heard about Leslie Weatherhead. He was a great pastor in London during World War Two. For three years, he spent almost every night in the underground stations with the people of central London, leading prayers and helping to calm their anxiety. He also helped to disarm their hatred of the Germans, whose bombs and rockets were destroying their city and killing their neighbors. He often spoke of the need to forgive our enemies and to find forgiveness for our own failures and shortcomings.

Weatherhead liked to describe God's work of forgiveness in terms of the old sludge boats that once carried off sewage from the city of London. This was before the days of modern sewage systems. He said you could see the little sludge boats lining up at the docks and having the waste pumped onto them. Then, one by one, they would sail off toward the mouth of the Thames and out into the ocean. Hundreds of miles out, they would dump their cargo into the sea. There, within minutes, the sea would work its magic, churning the sewage over and over until the water was pure and clean again.

Life in London would have been unthinkable without those sludge boats. The city would have been unbearable. And the same would be true for a world like ours—a world of terror, and anger, and hatred, and suspicion—if it weren't for God's love and forgiveness, the sludge boats of the spirit, carrying away the anger and the guilt and the hostility, and making life habitable again. It would, wouldn't it? Weatherhead was right. We couldn't live very long without love and forgiveness. We need them in order to be ourselves, in order to be deeply human. Our world needs them.

Perhaps you have read the autobiography written by Corrie Ten Boom, entitled *The Hiding Place*. In this powerful book, Corrie Ten Boom, who has been imprisoned by the Nazi regime for her hiding and protection of Jews, tells of her experience of preaching at a church service on the very subject of forgiveness after the war was over and she had been released from prison camp. As she left the pulpit and came down to the center of the sanctuary, she noticed a man coming toward her with his hand extended and a bright smile on his face. She immediately recognized him as the chief guard in the concentration camp where she and her sister had been imprisoned, and where her sister had died. The guard's face was beaming that night after the church service. "Oh, Fraulein," he said, "how grateful I am for your powerful message. To think that Jesus washed my sins away."

Corrie Ten Boom found herself paralyzed as the guard thrust his hand out toward hers. She could not raise her hand from her side. She writes, "Even as the vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. . . . and yet I could do nothing about it. I could not feel even the slightest spark of love or charity. And so I breathed this silent prayer. 'Jesus, I cannot forgive him, please give me your forgiveness.'" And with that prayer she

was able to lift her hand from her side and touched the hand of the man who had persecuted her. "From my shoulder," she writes, "along my arm and through my hand passed a current from me to him . . . and in that moment I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing depends, the world's healing depends upon God. When our Lord tells us to love our enemies, he gives us, along with the command to do it, the love itself" [New York: Bantam Books, 1971; p. 238].

Jesus asks us to forgive, because he knows that it is not only good for the person we forgive, but because it is good for us and for everyone around us. And based on the experience of Corrie Ten Boom, if we ask God for the power to forgive, we will get it.

And she is not the only person who has discovered the power of God's forgiveness in their life. British author and theologian, C. S. Lewis expresses the same idea in one of his journal entries. He wrote, "Last week while at prayer, I suddenly discovered that I had finally forgiven someone that I had been trying to forgive for over thirty years. I have no explanation, my friends, for this kind of thing except to turn to the words of the Apostle Paul, written over two thousand years ago: 'All of this is from God.'"

What keeps us from forgiving others? In the case of Corrie Ten Boom, it was anger that the prison guard was part of an evil regime that imprisoned her and her sister, causing suffering and death. Likewise, the people Leslie Weatherhead ministered to in London were also angry at the suffering and death they were experiencing. Those are powerful reasons to withholding their forgiveness.

Alice Miller, in her book "*For Your Own Good*" talks about forgiving when we are angry. *Genuine forgiveness does not deny anger but faces it head on. If I can feel outrage at the injustice I have suffered, can recognize my persecution as such, and can acknowledge and hate my persecutor for what he or she has done, only then will the way to forgiveness be open to me.*

Miller suggests we have to face up to what is making us angry, not try and suppress or bury it. Only by acknowledging that we are angry can we take the first steps to forgiveness.

Who are your angry at? Who in your life needs your forgiveness?

Are you angry at President Bush because of the war in Iraq? Are you angry with the people that support and defend America's actions in the Middle East? Or maybe you are on the other side of the issue. Maybe you are angry at the anti-war protesters and

politicians instead. If you are angry, maybe it is time to consider forgiveness instead of anger.

Carolyn Osiek, in her book *“Beyond Anger”* says this: *It is not “forgive and forget” as if nothing wrong had ever happened, but “forgive and go forward,” building on the mistakes of the past and the energy generated by reconciliation to create a new future.*

Are you angry with a family member, a current or former spouse, a neighbor, or coworker that has hurt you? Is your family relationship strained by bad feelings and a history of not getting along? Are you tired of tense dinners, dysfunctional family reunions, and strained Holiday celebrations? Are you sick of gossiping coworkers, office backstabbing, and unhealthy competition for promotions or work assignment?

Maybe it is time to consider forgiveness and healing instead.

In the Old Testament, in the Book of Amos, the traditional Jewish standard for forgiveness is *“For three transgressions . . . and for four, I will not revoke the punishment.”* It is repeated several times in the Book of Amos. When Peter comes to ask Jesus how many times we should forgive, he knows about the tradition of three times. But Peter has been paying attention to what Jesus has been saying, and knows how Jesus preaches a Gospel of forgiveness, so he suggests a larger number, seven times. Peter probably feels he is being very generous to forgive someone seven times, so Jesus’s answer probably stuns him. *“Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”*

Now I ought to tell you that the Greek word in the Bible can mean either “seventy seven” or “seventy times seven”, so either way Jesus wants us to forgive people quite a few times. A better way of thinking about it is that Jesus wants us to forgive an infinite number of times. We shouldn’t be keeping track of our forgiveness, we should just keep forgiving.

That brings to mind, the passage from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Letter to the Corinthians: *<sup>4</sup>Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. <sup>8</sup>Love never ends.*

My suggestion to you is that we can change the Apostle Paul’s words slightly and they will work just as well for forgiveness. When Paul says love, I think he is also saying forgiveness.

*<sup>4</sup>Forgiveness is patient; forgiveness is kind; forgiveness is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. <sup>8</sup>forgiveness never ends.*

So my question for you this morning is: Who do you know that needs your forgiveness?  
And when can you start?

Amen.