

The third in a series of five Lenten message series from Bishop Stephen Lane

²¹ 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?' ²²Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven* times. (Matthew 18:21-22)

Frank Griswald, former Presiding Bishop, once said in a meditation, perhaps quoting someone else, "God gives us to one another without our permission, and then invites us to love one another." That line has stayed with me for many years.

None of us asks to be born. None of us gets to decide the family, the culture, the class, the religion, the country, the community that is ours. The folks who show up at school or work or church are not all people we would have chosen to be with. So much of our lives is given: by birth, by circumstance, by accident. People just show up in our lives, and we find we're stuck with them. And worse, God invites us to love them. God invites us to love one another as members of one family without regard to race or sex or circumstance. Much of the time, it just seems impossible.

I know that I'm a sinner and in need of forgiveness. And I'm grateful for that. I'm glad to be accepted by God. But you... well, I'm not so sure about you. How can God forgive you for what you've done? I mean really... there have to be some standards, some rules.

And certainly it's true that although God accepts and loves us as we are, God does not leave us there. God invites us to grow in love and grace, to grow in our ability to give and receive love, to forgive and be forgiven.

And there, it seems to me, is a key for the process of reconciliation. It is not a one and done. It's not a matter of one day simply letting go of the past. It's a daily process of moving closer to one another as an expression of the love we've received in being loved and forgiven. Maybe today we can't forgive 70 times, or even 7, or even once. Perhaps today reconciliation is beyond our ability. Perhaps what we're experiencing - the violence, the racism, the misogyny - is so great that all we know is hurt and anger.

Reconciliation is beyond us. But it's not beyond God. God is at work with you and with me and with those who have hurt us and holding out the possibility that we might grow in love toward one another. That growth can be very difficult - the reconciliation process in South Africa demonstrated that going forward is only possible after we've heard one another's pain - but it is possible.

May we see reconciliation not as a goal line to be crossed or a race to be finished, but a journey along which we walk more closely together. Where we are now is not where we hope to be someday, and God walks with us.

Let us pray.

Merciful God, you have forgiven me and drawn me to yourself, but it is so hard for me to forgive others. Help me walk with them and learn to walk more closely with them and with you. Amen.