

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2026

Genesis 50:15-21

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

No MMA fighter voluntarily “taps out.” MMA is the abbreviation for Mixed Martial Arts. Mixed Martial Arts is a full contact combat sport. It’s violent. Admittedly, I’ve never watched it but I’m familiar with the principles. One of those principles is “tapping out.” Think of tapping out as crying “uncle.” No MMA fighter cries “uncle” voluntarily. A fighter surrenders when the pain becomes too severe to continue. A fighter “taps out” to avoid losing consciousness. A fighter “taps out” to avoid a catastrophic injury. The fighter who “taps out” is in a submission hold by his opponent. Here are two of the submission holds: The Americana Joint Lock bends the opponent’s arm in an unnatural “L” shape to hyper-rotate the shoulder joint. The unfortunate soul is face down on the mat with his upper arm pressed flush to the mat. The forearm is perpendicular to the mat and then rotated backwards in that unnatural “L” shape. Would that get you to tap out? There’s the Triangle Choke Hold – that’s when someone has their legs around your neck and one of your arms in a triangle shape to cut off blood flow to the brain. No MMA fighter taps out voluntarily. The force applied to the body demands submission. An MMA fighter taps out because he must.

Peter asks a question that you or I might ask. It seems pertinent. It was practical at its heart. I’m confident that Peter wanted a straight answer. It’s possible, though, that Peter was show-boating. Forgiveness was catching on with Peter. Jesus’ teaching was getting through, at least somewhat. Peter thought generously. The Rabbis had been teaching that one should forgive the same sin in others three times. After that, it was expected that this whole forgiveness thing was over. That was the forgiveness arithmetic of the time. Peter was drawing on Jesus’ generosity – so he doubled the rabbis’ “3” and added one for good measure – that’s, *perhaps*, how he came up with “7.” And 7 is the number for perfection, so Peter was showboating and too cute by half. “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (Matthew 18:21). How many of y’all have been there? Again? I’ve got to go through this with you again? How many of y’all have been there?

A parable is unleashed that is not designed to make *anyone* look good. This parable is designed to indict – you, me, Peter, and every Christian on the face of the planet. A powerful force is applied to your heart, your soul. Let’s rehearse the key parts. A king, as is his right, wants to settle accounts. One fellow has a jaw-dropping debt. It’s enormous, unpayable, a burden of excessive weight (ten thousand talents), and this debtor is hauled in front of the king. He begs. He lies (he says that he’ll pay but there’s no way that he’ll ever be able to pay). And the king cuts him loose. It’s astonishing! The king forgives the debt and sets the man completely free. Cartwheels and confetti and champagne – the man is forgiven. And this free bird goes out and intentionally *finds* a fellow servant who owes him a Hamilton (\$10). And the free bird drops the hammer on his fellow servant. “Pay up or I’ll pitch you into debtors’ prison and you’ll rot there, you scoundrel.” The fellow servant begs, just like our villain begged, but the villain is merciless and puts him in prison. A bunch of fellow servants see what transpired and they tell the king who is irate. The bum is hauled back before the king and there’s hell to pay (literally).

“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” How many of y’all have sinned against our Lord more than seven times? How many of you can look at the cross of our Lord and think that we are to be bean counters, keepers of a record of wrongs, and hold our brothers to a standard that we could never meet ourselves? Freely you have received. Freely give. There is no “forgiveness arithmetic” in the kingdom of heaven. We have all amassed a debt of ten thousand talents. We have defied God and His Word. We have dealt selfishly with those dearest to us. We have no personal holiness bank account upon which to draw and pay ourselves out of our standing before God. We deserve something way worse than debtors’ prison. We’ve soiled ourselves. We’ve profaned God’s name. We’ve lied and lusted seven times seventy times. We can’t hold our brother’s sin over him. We are to forgive as we’ve been forgiven. Anything less is hell to pay. The parable is a submission hold. The parable is Jesus putting us in a theological submission hold and there’s no escape. We tap out. Any sane Christian taps out. You’ve got us.

If you want to put a limit on how many times you are to forgive others, then you haven’t learned what you’ve been forgiven and you’ve got shark’s eyes. Remember the movie, *Jaws*? The lead shark hunter was a man named Quint who served on the USS Indianapolis during WWII. The Indianapolis was delivering the Hiroshima atomic bomb components to Tinian, an island in the Western Pacific. After doing so, it was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine. The Indianapolis sank in twelve minutes, plunging 1200 men into the water. Sharks; only 316 men survived. Quint described the attacks. “A thing about a shark, he’s got lifeless eyes, black eyes, like a doll’s eyes, when he comes at ‘ya he doesn’t seem to be living.” That’s what Jesus is describing – the man who had been forgiven so much coming at his fellow servant for a pittance (he doesn’t seem to be living). The parable is submission hold, designed to get us to see how antithetical to Christ and His love, Christ and His cross that unforgiveness is. The parable is designed to get you to repent of the idea that forgiveness is ours to stop. “To steadfastly refuse to forgive is unjust and wicked. A life filled with such refusal is a life where faith in Jesus – if it exists – will die” (Gibbs, pg. 941).

Now, just a few words of pastoral care. Forgiveness – it does not mean that a woman is to subject herself to ongoing abuse. We are not called upon to suffer unconditionally at the hands of another. Forgiveness – it does not mean that offenders aren’t to face civic justice. Forgiveness – it doesn’t mean that we aren’t to call our brother to repentance and for any and all to amend their behavior. Forgiveness – it doesn’t mean that your emotions may necessarily be warm and fuzzy. Forgiveness – it does mean that you release someone from the retribution and retaliation that they may very well deserve to receive (Gibbs, pg. 940). We forgive as we have been forgiven. None of you have shark’s eyes. None of you are dead in trespasses and sins. You have been remade, regenerated by the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Forgiveness is alive in you just as Christ is alive in you. Forgiveness is our hallmark. Forgiveness is our charter.

Why is that? Because Christ was handed over to the jailer. Jesus was the supremely innocent One. He had no debt. All of our debt was transferred to Him and He gladly took it, knowing what it would mean. The King’s Son was handed over to the chief priests, the religious rulers in Israel. They presented false witness to Pontius Pilate and Pilate crucified our Lord. The debt before God that is yours was put on Jesus. And He was crucified. The King settled accounts by crucifying His Son. The enormity of your sin-debt was paid for by the Holy Son of God – the

deceit, the selfishness, the pettiness, the lust, the hate, the filth that comes from your mouth, the filth that lies hidden in your heart, Jesus paid it with His holy and precious blood. To redeem you, to reclaim you, to set you free from death and hell, Jesus bled, suffered under the wrath of His Father over your sin, and He died. "It is finished" (John 19:30). You are alive with His sacrifice. You are alive with His grace. You are alive with His forgiveness. It's beautiful to be alive. It's the apex of life to be a Christian. We will not scandalize our fellow servants by not forgiving. We will not show the world that we are unlike our Lord by not forgiving. We will train our children in the grace of God and they will flourish. We will train our emotions to follow what we have learned from our Lord and what we obediently do. We will forgive as we have been forgiven (Ephesians 4:32). God's name will be hallowed among us. The glory of God will shine among us. The beauty of Christianity will be seen in us. We will forgive as we have been forgiven (Colossians 3:13).