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Have you ever had a conflict with someone that seemed too difficult to solve alone? That was the case with

Two siblings who were left a large piece of property by their father. For months they fought over how the land should be divided. Finally, they brought their problem to their rabbi and asked him to solve it.

“Come back tomorrow,” said the rabbi, “and we’ll talk.”

The next day the brother and sister returned, and the rabbi gave them his solution.

“Toss a coin,” he said to one of the siblings. “You call it, heads or tails,” he said to the other. “The one who wins the toss, divides the land.”

“That’s no solution,” said one of the siblings. “We’re right back where we started from.”

“Not so,” said the rabbi. “The one who wins the toss divides the land; but the other gets first choice.”¹

Sometimes we enter into difficulties that seem too challenging to solve ourselves, even in the church, and Jesus suggested when that happens the church is here to help mediate. He had just finished telling the disciples arguing over who was the greatest that to enter the kingdom heaven, one must be like a child, and then he warned them to not lead astray one of

these little ones. Finally, he suggested that God is like a shepherd who searches for even one lost little lamb.

After all this talk about God’s loving and forgiving nature, someone must have asked, “What about the time so and so hurt me? How should I respond?” Jesus replied,

If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you’ve made a friend. If he won’t listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. If he still won’t listen, tell the church. If he won’t listen to the church, you’ll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God’s forgiving love.²

And then Jesus suggested, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” I think that reminder was as much for all those who would come in later generations as it was for those gathered with Jesus on that day. Somehow, I think Jesus knew that conflicts would not end, even after telling the world how much God loves us.

As we enter this season of Lent, the forty days leading to Easter, this conversation between Jesus and his followers seems appropriate for us as well, for it’s a chance to practice creating the kingdom of heaven,

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a phrase that Jesus used to paint a picture of what it's like when God lives among us.

As I suggested on Ash Wednesday, the next six weeks provide us an opportunity to practice some basic skills we learned as children. Some might reply, "Are you kidding? Practice something I learned in my childhood?" Recall something from that many years ago? I have a hard-enough time remembering something from yesterday!"

That's why it's important to listen to the youngest among us, to hear their questions, to cherish their inquisitiveness, to celebrate their imagination. Over the next six weeks we will recall some of those basic things we learned in relation to parables of Jesus: say thank you and please, play fair, be prepared, help one another, and mind your manners. This week we begin with two words: be nice. But that's not always easy, is it, especially when someone hurts us. Sometimes we'd rather get back at someone, inflicting as much pain as we've experienced, but Jesus offered us a suggestion in the prayer he taught his disciples, words that we say every week: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive one another."

We all have our shortcomings, our sins, our mistakes, which is something we have in common even with those who have hurt us. Catholic monk Thomas Merton once said:

How do we learn to love our enemy? By seeing [this person] as a brother [or sister] who is tempted as we are, and attacked by the same real enemy which is the spirit of hatred... This same enemy seeks to destroy us both by pitting us against one another."³

It's by offering forgiveness that we break this cycle of hatred, that we let go of the anger and allow ourselves to move forward. It's not any easy process, something we may find ourselves facing over and over again, but the process of forgiveness helps us welcome the kingdom of heaven, a place of healing. Over the next six weeks we will travel to an imagery broadcast studio to interview those who were the center of Jesus' stories who learned the basics of what we often learn in childhood, which reflect what it's like living in the presence of God.

¹ Anonymous, adapted, HomileticsOnline.com

² Matthew 18:15-17, *The Message Bible*

³ Passion for Peace, Crossroad, 1995.

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Setting: Two chairs, one for host and one for guest, seated side by side facing congregation. Small table for host.

Doug: This is Pastor Doug with WPBA, “Parables Brought Alive.” Over the next several weeks we’ll bring to life people from the parables of Jesus, so I hope you will join us each week for these exclusive interviews, heard only on this station. Jesus had been speaking about forgiveness, and when his disciple Peter wondered whether forgiving someone seven times was generous enough, Jesus suggested 77 times instead, which leads to Jesus telling a story about our first guest. *(speaking to guest)* I understand that you owed a lot of money to a king, and when the king decided to collect on his outstanding accounts, you discovered you couldn’t pay up. Can you tell us what happened next?

Guest: Yes. I appreciate you having me on your program today... I approached the king and explained that I wasn’t ready to pay the full

amount I owed, but he insisted that I needed to pay up right away.

Doug: How much did you owe the king?

Guest: Ten thousand talents.

Doug: I’ve heard that a talent is worth about a million dollars in today’s money, and some sources indicated the amount you owed was about 16 years’ worth of wages.

Guest: It was such a large sum of money that I knew I could never repay it. In order to make the payments, the king ordered that I be sold, along with my wife and children and everything we owned.

Doug: That sounds like a very steep price to pay.

Guest: I agree. I fell on my knees and begged for mercy from the king, asking for more time to pay off the debt.

Doug: I can’t even imagine the trauma that you faced. What happened?

Guest: The king decided to not give me any more time to pay my debt, but instead he forgave my debt—the whole amount!

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Doug: That's amazing. What a gift of grace you received. How did you "pay it forward" as you encountered those who owed you money?

Guest: As I left the king, I ran into someone I've been trying to collect from for a long time, which impacted my inability to pay off my debts. He owed me a hundred denarii, and I demanded that he pay up right then.

Doug: A hundred denarii is only worth a couple dollars in today's money, or in your day about one day's worth of wages. Was he able to pay you?

Guest: No, he was not, so I had him thrown in jail.

Doug: Let me get this straight. You had just been forgiven millions of dollars' worth of debt, and you had someone thrown in jail for a couple dollars that he owed you?

Guest: That wasn't my greatest moment in life, for when the king heard what I had done, he called me back and exclaimed, "I had mercy on you and forgave your huge debt. Shouldn't you have shown mercy to one who owed you a trivial

amount?" I didn't know what to say, so he reinstated my debt.

Doug: Forgiveness is not an easy thing to do, and even Jesus' closest followers struggled to understand the concept. When Peter asked Jesus if he should forgive someone seven times, Peter probably thought he was being very generous. Jesus' vision of forgiveness went way beyond Peter's idea, for Jesus suggested forgiving 77 times, representing endless forgiveness, something offered over and over again. In other words, Jesus suggested something most of us learned very early in life: be nice to others.

Guest: I guess I better start counting...1...2...3...4...

Doug: This has been a live interview coming to you from WPBA, "Parables Brought Alive." Join us next week as we hear about someone who felt he was cheated out of fair wages. Until next time, remember what we learned as children: be nice, forgive—and keep counting to 77 and beyond.

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