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I've noticed a lot more rudeness lately. Several times I have put on my turn signal, allowed plenty of room between vehicles, changed lanes, only to hear a car honking at me from behind, as though my lane change took the other driver's place. How rude.

Another time I pulled into a gas station to a pump in front of another car. Even though I didn't know the other driver was done filling up, I guess I was in the way, for I was greeted with a barrage of swear words as the driver behind me pulled out and left the gas station. How rude.

Another time I reached around someone for a head of lettuce at the grocery store, only to have someone lash out that I was getting in their personal space.

In those times we may inadvertently cross into what another person considers their space, instead of experiencing forgiveness, it seems that many people are lashing out with anger, caught in a cycle of mayhem. We talk a lot in the church about forgiveness, but I'm concerned it's on the decline.

Forgiveness is becoming as rare as the mayfly, insects declining here in Indiana, where we host one of the most diverse arrays of mayfly species west of the Appalachian Mountains, about 160 identified so far. According to state records, nearly a quarter of those are threatened, endangered or gone. In some streams in the state and across North America, mayfly populations are so depleted that they may not be able to reproduce in sufficient numbers for much longer.

Did you know mayflies are the "oldest surviving winged insects on the planet"? They have been depicted in artwork, such as an engraving of the Holy family by the German artist Albrecht Dürer. Notice the mayfly in the bottom righthand corner.

Rock fossils of mayflies show their ancient existence, for someone in Massachusetts discovered a 300-million-year rock impression of a mayfly.

They've been around a long time, and we would experience mayhem if the mayflies disappeared, for Mayflies are a mainstay of the world's many food chains...[which] consume algae, plant matter and decaying leaves. The nutrients and energy...are passed on to other animals when they are eaten.

Without mayflies, our food chain could collapse, creating mayfly mayhem. Indiana biologist Luke Jacobus

believes that some mayflies will survive, no matter what insults come their way. The heartiest, and, in an evolutionary sense, luckiest, will probably live on after humans are long gone. But he admits that a decline in the variety of species would be a gloomy prospect. When mayflies go missing, he said, it's a clear indication that yet another place in the world is out of balance.<sup>1</sup>

Not only the absence of mayflies could create mayhem, but the decline of forgiveness creates its own mayhem as we humans group ourselves into polarized groups and become ruder in our encounters with others.

Jesus warned of similar mayhem as he told a story about two people who owed others money. He told the story in response to Peter asking what he should do if someone in the church sinned against him. It's hard to imagine church people not getting along, isn't it? We're all about love and forgiveness,

getting along and being kind. Peter suggested, "How about seven times, Jesus? Is that enough times to forgive someone in the church?" Jesus replied, "Not nearly enough. More like 77 times or even 70 times 7."

I could maybe keep track of offering seven moments of forgiveness, but I would have a difficult time remembering 77 or 490 times, for I'm sure I would lose count. Maybe that was the point Jesus was trying to make—offer unlimited forgiveness. Don't even try to keep track.

And then Jesus offered a story of mayhem, when forgiveness didn't work quite right. Someone (let's call him Jim) owed a king 10,000 talents. One talent equaled about 15 years of wages. If you do a little math in your head, take your annual salary, multiply by 15, and then multiply that sum by 10,000. It's a huge number—in the millions. In other words, a huge amount. When the king ordered Jim and his family and all their possessions to be sold to pay a portion of his debt, Jim pleaded for patience to

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repay over time. The king was so moved that he forgave the entire debt, just like that.

Jim, who had just been forgiven, then encountered someone, let's call her Jane, who owed Jim a hundred denarii, which would have equaled about three months wages. And here's where the mayhem begins. Jim, who had been forgiven a huge amount, grabbed Jane who owed a smaller debt, seizing her by the throat, exclaiming, "Pay up, right now!" Jane pleaded for forgiveness, which ended in mayhem as Jim said "no!"

When word got back to the king about Jim's refusal to offer forgiveness, the king exclaimed, "I forgave your debt when you pleaded with me. Shouldn't you offer the same grace to someone who pleads with you?"

We can read this as a parable about God—that God offers more grace than we can ever repay, and our role includes offering meek amount of forgiveness in our encounters with others. Although I don't view God as one who throws us in jail when we neglect to offer forgiveness, I think the parable

underscores God's great disappointment with us when we hoard forgiveness for ourselves and don't share it with others.

I think it's interesting that this parable about forgiveness is set in the context of Peter asking about forgiving someone in the church. The story seems to reflect the struggle of the early church, which was filled with conflict and may have had a difficult time living out the teachings of Jesus.

But I think it's also a story about us right here at this moment, for as our two churches discern how to live out this new relationship that we entered into, we're bound to run into problems. There are a lot of details to work out—creating a unified budget, estimating our combined income and expenses for next year, continuing to learn how to share space, and preparing for a new minister. Along the way we might hear such comments as:

- We're not used to doing things like that.
- That's not how we spend our money.
- Your stuff is in my space.
- I prefer my music over your music.

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- Who's gonna pay that bill?
- Who put this in the kitchen in the wrong place?

You can probably imagine other conversations that could occur, or maybe ones that have already happened. It's in these moments that we could let mayhem happen, with forgiveness disappearing as quickly as the mayflies, or we can do what Jesus suggested: offer forgiveness, not just seven times, but 77 or 490 times. It's your choice: mayhem or forgiveness. Choose wisely.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2022/09/19/mayfly-decline/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2022/09/19/mayfly-decline/)