Seventy-seven Times?

Years ago, while in Nigeria
  We would occasionally lodge
  At the Baptist Guest House in Jos.

It was a little American oasis in the heart of Africa!

The guesthouse was run by an elderly lady
  From South Carolina.

One evening following a nice American-style meal
  We lingered over coffee with a couple from New Zealand.

Discussion turned to colleges in the US.

Their daughter was considering going to school there
  And they were told by several people

That the colleges in the north of the country
  Were superior to the ones in the south.

The South Carolina woman overheard the conversation
  And was quick to point out

“Well, we didn’t start the war!”
  And then stormed off.

It took me a moment to figure out
  Which war she was talking about.
Of course, she was talking about the Civil War
  An event that took place more than 150 years-ago.

Yet, the way she acted
  You would have thought it was yesterday.

The bitterness, suspicion, and hostility
  Had been passed down through the generations.

Peter asks Jesus how many times
  He should forgive someone who wronged him
Seventy-seven Times?
Even up to seven times?

Now I’m thinking, Peter is thinking
He’s quite generous with the number seven.

The Jewish teaching of the day required a person
To forgive up to three times for the same offence.

But Jesus tells him not seven times but seventy-seven times.

I mean Jesus has to be exaggerating here, right?

Come on . . . 77 times?
Do we expect a person in an abusive relationship
To forgive the abuser 77 times?

No.

But it appears Jesus meant what he said.

Because he goes on to teach them a parable
With an explicit answer to Peter’s question.

I confess having a bit of a problem with the parable.

Maybe it’s me.

But if the lesson is on the need to forgive 77 times

And if the king represents God

Then the king himself does not follow through
On the command to forgive 77 times.

Instead of forgiving the servant again
Like the lesson supposedly teaches
The king has him tortured and imprisoned!
Seventy-seven Times?

It would be a tough stretch to explain this away
Except to say, as Jesus teaches us
In a passage we looked at earlier

Matthew 6:14-15  (CEV)  

14 If you forgive others for the wrongs they do to you, your Father in heaven will forgive you.  
15 But if you don’t forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.

In today’s passage, Jesus enforces the idea
That no one enters the kingdom of God
With an unforgiving heart.

And so, an essential teaching of Jesus is to forgive.
But saying we’ll do it . . .
And actually doing do it . . . are two different things.

Tim Keller, retired pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian, NYC  Helps me to understand
Some of the dynamics in forgiveness.

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When someone wrongs us, an injustice has been committed.

Because of the wrong . . .
We feel the perpetrator must pay some sort of penalty.

If we simply forgive . . .
Then the wrongdoer gets away with it.

Therefore, it is not right to simply dismiss it.

There are two ways to respond.

The first way is to find a way to make the perpetrator pay
For what he/she has done.

Sometimes we passively do this.

We break off our relationship with them
Seeking to ignore them out of existence.
Sometimes we actively seek ways for them to pay.

We say or do things that hurt them.

We speak ill to their face and to others
   Hoping to have others turn against them.

If the wrongdoer begins to suffer as a result
   In some way we feel compensated.

One of the problem with this is our own attitude.

Once this sort of action starts, it becomes all obsessive
   And eventually turns us into cold hearted people.

We may even begin to dislike other people
   Who are similar to the person who wronged us.

Say, for example, if the person is rich
   We will come to dislike rich people.

If the person is male
   We may hold grudges towards all men.

Perhaps, if the person is of another race
   We become prejudiced against the whole class.

And not only, another problem
   Like in our opening illustration
      Hard feelings towards a certain group of people
         Can be passed on for generations.

With an attitude of revenge
   Nothing breaks the cycle of retaliation
      And it is lived over and over and over again.

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The other way to respond to a wrong is this.
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We forgive.

It doesn’t mean we don’t hold the perpetrator accountable.

Forgiveness is refusing to get sucked into
    The vicious cycle of getting even or one better.

Forgiveness, however, is extremely hard work.

The desire to inflict misery on the offender
    Is often stronger than the desire to forgive.

We end up not only suffering the original wrong
    The loss of happiness and trust.

We don’t even get the satisfaction
    Of making that person suffer for what they did.

We end up absorbing the pain of the injustice.

Where’s the justice in that?
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But there’s something about Jesus here.

This is the exact description of Christ’s atonement . . .
    His unjust death on the cross.

Jesus absorbs the pain of wrong done to him
    And forgives without demanding retribution.

 Matthew 5:38-39 (CEV) 38 You know that you have been taught, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” 39 But I tell you not to try to get even with a person who has done something to you. When someone slaps your right cheek, turn and let that person slap your other cheek.
~~
Jesus’ death is the fullest expression of God’s love.

Do you think it was easy?
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But just as Jesus absorbed unjust punishment
    Jesus transforms it into a victory
    Through his resurrection.

Our will to forgive a wrong
    Will also lead to its own resurrection.

The anger will subside
    The hostile and vengeful feelings will lift
    And peace will replace the hurt.

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We have to forgive in the mind
    Before it becomes real in the heart.

It may not come immediately.

But if you remain focused on the intent to forgive
    It will come eventually.

It will lead to a new peace
    And end the vicious cycles of hate and evil.

It is the only way to stop the spread of evil.

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“But shouldn’t the perpetrators be held accountable?”

Of course!

But do so in an attitude of love.

The best way to love them is to challenge them
    In the hope they might change.

Love yourself and other potential victims
    By making sure the wrong can’t happen again.

But this should not be our only goal.
Seventy-seven Times?

We need some personal health care
   And that means learning to forgive.

Forgiveness is costly.

Forgiveness is painful.

But it is the only way to free from the hurt.

A black woman in South Africa stood in the courtroom
   Listening to a white police officer
   Acknowledge atrocities committed
   During the Apartheid.
Officer Van de Broek confessed his responsibility
   In the death of her son.

He had shot the 18-year-old and burned the body
   While he and other officers drank beer

Eight years later, the very same police officer
   Went to the woman’s house and seized her husband.

He returned a couple of hours later
   And took the woman to a woodpile
   Where her husband lay bound.

They forced her to watch
   As they poured gasoline over his body
   And ignited the flames that consumed him.

Her husband’s final words were, “Forgive them.”

Now the same man stood awaiting judgment before
   The South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

They asked the woman what justice she wanted.

She said calmly, “I want three things,”
Seventy-seven Times?

“I want Mr. Van de Broek to take me to the place
  Where he burned my husband’s body.”

“I want to gather up the dust and give him a decent burial.”

“Second, Mr. Van de Broek took away the only family I had.”
  “Twice a month, I want him to come to the ghetto
    And spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him.”

“Third, I would like Mr. Van de Broek to know
  That he is forgiven by God
    And that I forgive him, too.”

“And now, would someone lead me to him
  So I can embrace him
    So he knows my forgiveness is real.”

As the elderly woman was helped across the courtroom
  Mr. Van de Broek, collapsed and fainted.

Someone started in singing Amazing Grace
  Soon everyone joined in.

This woman understood that to be reconciled to God
  And to be reconciled with neighbor and enemy
    Is to be truly free.

(from Stanley Green, The Canadian Mennonite, 9.04.00)

In this Season of Lent
  We come to the foot of the cross

Seeking to learn the hard and difficult lessons
  Of forgiving one another as Christ forgives us.