

Texts: Genesis 7:6-16, Matthew 18:21-35

Last week, we closed our gospel reading with this verse: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them.” (Matt. 18:20) How do we recognize the present Jesus?

When the doctor enters the room, the conversation turns to medical talk. When the financial advisor steps in, we know we’ll focus on numbers. When movers come to the house, we know they’ll be moving stuff.

“When two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them.” What do we look for?

Those words were spoken after Jesus taught a process of conflict resolution. First, go the person who did wrong, alone, to attempt to mend the relationship. Second, if that fails, try again, but this time bring a few elders along as witnesses. Third, if neither of those work, bring it to the attention of the wider church body. If all fails, identify the fallen person as a Gentile or tax collector; one of those lost sheep whom the Good Shepherd seems to have a special soft spot for. When two or three are gathered in his name the Good Shepard, appears, inciting seeking, including impulses.

Does Jesus appear just to make us feel better, more assured, more confident? To lead us to sing hymns, read scripture, take an offering? Give us the right words, make special moments hum with meaning? Does Jesus show up with his soul-fixing, relationship-repairing toolkit and make everything miraculously better? Or does he let us do it?

The next lesson is forgiveness, from the Jesus in the room. Peter asks, “How many times must I forgive my sister or brother? Is seven times the max?” Jesus is there, present. What does Jesus do, there, with them? Jesus ups the max. Some translations say he raises it from Peter’s seven to seventy-seven, others say seven times seventy. It’s a lot of forgiveness, imbedded with Jesus there, with them, with us. Jesus’ presence unleashes rampant, repeated forgiveness.

I called an audible on our Old Testament selection this morning; I decided on a last-minute change. My mind went toward the flood, in Genesis, not only because of the recent storms, but because of our gospel lesson.

Noah, as we recall, was chosen by God to save all humanity, and two of every species, from the flood that God would send, because God was maxed out on forgiving all the messed-up people on earth. God was heartbroken; the Lord regretted that he ever created human beings. “I am undone”, one translator puts it, describing the fragile emotional state of God. We might say: God was just a mess.

To prepare for the flood, Noah built the ark, brought his family, and two of every animal onto the ark, and the rains came, for forty days. The flood ensued. By the time the water receded and the land was dry enough for the family and the animals to disembark, an

entire year passed. Noah, his wife, three sons, their wives, the clean and unclean animals, birds, and every crawling thing on the ground, two of each, male and female spent an entire year in the ark. Stuck together, day in, day out. The chores, the feedings, the cleaning up, the noise, the smells, the drudgery, the skirmishes. No calendar, no plan. Stuck. What I never noticed before is a little detail, in Genesis. When they all were safely aboard, it says: "Then the Lord closed the door behind them."

The Lord closed them in, shut the door. Not only to protect them from the storm outside, but also to test their ability to endure whatever happened inside. The entire spectrum of difference in God's creation, confined in one space, and God locked 'em in! And now they're forced to find some way to live together, not only for their own survival but to secure the future of all life, human and animal, birds and things that creep along the ground, on this planet. Everything was riding on that year, and those diverse, contained inhabitants of the ark. God closed them in – "See ya!". And we owe our lives to those ark-mates.

I imagine they had to up the max. Seventy times, or seventy times seven. Sorry. My fault. Excuse me. I forgive you, again. 24/7/365 days. With no days off. No weekends. Same old, same ark, same creatures. Lion stay over here, lamb over there. Snakes and pigs, mosquitos, flies and cockroaches, of course. I imagine it had to be a daily, rampant, repetitive unleashing of forgiveness, just to keep going, not kill each other, locked up on the ark. Seventy times seven, 24 hours, without a break. No reward or incentives, other than staying alive. Raise the max, survive the storm.

Jesus told a story. A king had a servant who owed him an exorbitant, outlandish, Fort Knox-size amount: ten thousand bags of gold: 165,000 years of earnings. This guy's credit was way maxed out. What did the king do with him? After the servant asked him for patience, the king forgave him, zeroed out the deficit. "We're good. Your account with me is clean!" 165,000 years-worth of debt: erased. An unimaginable, impossible amount: forgiven.

We're not told what happened inside the ark, over the course of that year, from the time God shut the door to when they emerged back onto dry land. We are told they came out alive, when God invited them out. "So Noah went out of the ark with his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives. All the animals, all the livestock, all the birds, and everything crawling on the ground, came out of the ark by their families." (Gen. 7:18-19) All alive, as intact families. I infer forgiveness; lots of it. The maximum: disciplined, practiced. Don't swat that fly. Protect that mosquito. The mama grizzly bear is just being who she is; we'll forgive her for being a bit touchy. The hippo didn't mean to sit on that.

They all disembarked, together, as families, launching a new start for this planet. Not split, but keeping together. The ark, after a year, proved non-toxic. How do you begin this new start, off the ark? Noah built an altar, to worship the Lord of life. I sense gratitude. I perceive humility. New possibilities emerged, an alternative future for all creation, crafted by a righteous man, on the ark. The wolf can live with the lamb, the

cow and the bear graze together. There is a non-toxic alternative to evil and destruction, beyond violence and fear; it emerged from that ark. Forgiveness, gratitude and humility. All creatures stuck together, confined by the Creator in the same place, be it ark or planet, be it creation myth or current reality. Forgiven for multiple infractions, given a way to keep us all going, despite owing enormous personal debt. We have been declared free from sin and given new life, by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ! God even changed after the flood; God is put back together a new way. "I will never again destroy every living thing as I have done." There is the rainbow as a reminder to God, and humanity, and all creation. Forgiveness, gratitude, humility keep the space non-toxic and its inhabitants alive. I am there with them.

For the forgiven servant, in Jesus' story, he chose not to enter a new way of life. He did not adapt to the alternative possibility which opens a future. He declined to forgive others even the least amount. Instead of upping the max, he lowered the minimum, did not forgive and found himself sentenced to prison by the king. Held accountable. He didn't get it. Didn't accept how you make it through to another day on the ark. Disciplined, practiced, 24/7/365. "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don't forgive your brother or sister from the heart." Rampant, repeated forgiveness: I am there with you.