Ludwig van Beethoven composed a magnificent Concert Mass in honor of his dear friend and financial patron, Archduke Rudolph of Austria, considered by many to be one of the great composer’s finest works. He worked at the piece for several years, completing it in 1823, because he wanted every note, every word, to be perfect, in the hope, as he wrote to the Archduke, “that the music would instill religious feelings in those who perform it, and those who hear it.” When, at last, the score was complete, he scribbled a personal wish at the top of the manuscript, “Written from the heart—may it go to the heart.”

Touching sentiment, isn’t it, …that something beautiful might pass from heart to heart? When we say of a musician is playing a piece of music “by heart,” we often mean that they are fully caught up in the music’s passion and meaning, probably playing or singing with eyes closed and soul exposed, more attuned to musical meaning than to musical notes. And similarly, what do we mean when we say someone recited a poem “by heart”? Don’t we mean that they did not look at any
notes; that the poem seemed to come directly from the inner places of their soul? If we say someone “spoke from their heart,” we mean that they relied on their true feelings rather than simply reading the cue cards of a prepared text. Given a choice, most of us would place greater value on communication of feelings delivered “by heart,” even if that involved a sacrifice of technical precision. (Someone asked me why I used a text rather than preaching from the heart… my response is that I get too easily distracted… a text is for your protection!)

In our Gospel today, Jesus calls us to some important, and difficult “heart work,” the work of forgiving those who sin against us, who hurt us, who offend us. Indeed, this entire section of Matthew’s Gospel is a collection of Jesus’ sayings directed to those of us within the Church, reminding us that the offending and relationship wounding actions that Jesus addresses, (and therefore the forgiving we are called to offer!), is within the family of faith. If you have been involved in the life of the Church for some time, you will understand that sometimes we hurt each other. We are not a perfect people. All of us within the circle of faith
can tell the stories of disappointment and offence inflicted from other believers, a form of “friendly fire.”

This section of scripture follows the passage we read last Sunday about trying to reconcile with a church member who offends us. To which Simon Peter asked Jesus a very logical question, “How many times do I have to forgive my brother or sister when they sin against me?” Before Jesus can reply, Peter gives tries to answer his own question with a response he thought Jesus would applaud. “I was thinking seven times.” Given that the Pharisees taught that one might forgive two, or most three times for the same offence, Peter thought he was going well beyond any possible expectation. As the old saying put it, “Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me!”

As he usually did, Jesus answered with hyperbole. “Not seven times, but seventy times seven.” Of course, the point is not the number 490, but that as long as you are counting, you have not really started forgiving at all. *Keeping score* and *real forgiveness* can’t co-exist.
While Peter was still scratching his head trying to wrap his mind around this wild answer, Jesus followed with a parable to illustrate his point even further. In the parable a man owed a king 10,000 talents, a truly impossible sum to repay. (Don’t even think about how the king could have *allowed* such a debt to pile up in the first place.) This entire story is dripping with exaggeration and hyperbole. The amount of his debt is simply the largest arithmetic number in the language of Jesus (10,000) multiplied by the largest denomination of money in their economic system (a talent). To get a perspective on this outrageous number, consider that the entire tax revenue of King Herod, the current ruler over Judea at this time, was only 900 talents per year. So this is a number that even a government would not be able to imagine paying, much less an individual. In today’s terms, this would be a debt of about $1.5 billion. When the servant begged the king for more time to raise the money, it would be sheer nonsense. The servant could not raise that much money if he worked every day for 150,000 years.
**But here is the kicker:** the king simply forgave the debt—every last penny, every denarii. You would think that servant would be changed forever, so overwhelmed by the incredible and undeserved forgiveness. Instead, he simply left the king’s chambers an unchanged man, perhaps thinking he had somehow outsmarted the king, or that the king was just getting senile. Anyway, this servant found another servant who owed him a mere 100 denarii, similar to a 90-day loan. To the shock of all of us who hear this parable, the one who was forgiven an impossible amount began to torment and punish the one who owed him so comparatively little. Of course, we know how the parable ended, as the king settled the score against the man who learned so little from his grace received, that he could not extend grace to another.

Wasted grace is a terrible sin indeed. How tragic to see this man with a heart so clogged it will not pump back out the grace he received!

What does Jesus mean by this story? He calls us to recognize that it is possible to receive grace and then fail *to allow that grace to do its full work with us*, that is, to make us **gracious**. Jesus is calling us to stop
counting, calculating, and scheming when it comes to forgiveness and grace. Instead, we are to be so attuned to the overwhelming and unmerited forgiveness we have received, that we cannot help but extend grace to others as well. Such forgiveness is not born out of our goodness, but of our gratitude. Because, God knows, forgiveness is hard work, and our own goodness and patience will run out long before grace’s work is done with us, or through us. Only be remaining tethered to the awareness that we are forgiven of an impossible debt by an eternally gracious God, can we properly sustain the will and the mercy to share that grace with those whose sins against us are so small by comparison.

The violence of Charlottesville, of St. Louis on Friday night, of the demonstrations in Richmond this weekend… What are we to say? Is it really about statues (or the windows in the National Cathedral on Wisconsin Avenue in D.C.?) History cannot ever be re-written. The mistakes of History are the crossroads of choice for us today. Will we
allow prejudice to continue? Will we stand quietly by as we hear it, or see it?

In his conclusion, Jesus said… we have to learn to forgive our brothers and sisters “from the heart.” Only a heart transformed by God’s heart can truly give this gift away as God intends.

Just remember… It is all a matter of the heart.