

Forgiveness algebra: The other side of the equation

Every Catholic knows forgiveness algebra: 7×70 times = the number of times we should forgive someone who hurts us (see Matthew 18:22, RSV).

Maybe the reason it gets a lot of airtime is because forgiving others is the part of the equation we can control. Apologizing is just as difficult (and just as important). And it's trickier because asking for forgiveness is no guarantee of its being granted.

When our son was 6 years old, he urinated on the floor of the bathroom at his school. (You know, like you do.) Now, bear in mind, this wasn't an accident; he'd been potty trained for years, and it was totally out of character for him. When it was clear that he'd done it intentionally, we pressed him to explain to us why. In his own words, he "wanted to see what would happen."

"What happened" was that we told him that he would have to apologize not only to his teacher but to the custodian at the school who had to clean up after him. He. Was. Terrified. He cried. He begged not to have to apologize. He even asked me what his punishment would be if he refused to apologize and, when I told him, he decided he could live with it.

In the end, we told him that apologizing was nonnegotiable. The next day, he went to school and – head hanging low – stood in front of a giant of a man and apologized. Sincerely. You've never seen a little boy who was as sorry as my son was at that moment. The custodian – a veteran of this sort of thing, and seemingly as uncomfortable to be there as my boy – quickly let my son off the hook. No fanfare. No drama. With a simple, "It's Ok, buddy," the situation ended. The whole thing took

about a minute.

As we adults did our obligatory handshaking and thank yous, my son skipped away down the hall. He literally skipped. All of his fear and uncertainty and shame instantaneously transformed into joy. That's the only word for it. He apologized. He was forgiven. And joy came after.

This Lenten season balance the forgiveness equation. Reflect with your family on the importance of asking for forgiveness along with the importance of forgiving others. There is joy on both sides of that equals sign.