

HOW MUCH IS SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN

TEXT: Matthew 18:21-35

I must confess that I have never been very good at math. So it has always been hard for me to come up with meaning to Jesus' instruction to Peter. How many times should I forgive? How am I supposed to keep count? Should I always carry a notepad on which I can mark down each word of forgiveness so I'll know when I have reached the approved number? Is the same number applicable for little slights (perhaps regularly being late for meetings) as for those misdeeds of greater importance (perhaps a physical injury or major theft)?

In today's reading we hear the familiar question from Peter. How many times am I supposed to forgive someone? He is looking for a definitive answer. But, Jesus disappoints him. "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Nice try, Peter. You are moving in the right direction. You just have a long way to go. Four hundred ninety. This is the number, if you have to have a number, but it is an impossible number. Completely unthinkable. Jesus uses an absurd exaggeration. What it means is this: forgive your brothers and sisters beyond your ability to keep track. If you are keeping track, it isn't really forgiveness at all, is it? You may seem to be kind, but keeping track simply means that you are waiting for your neighbor to cross some line—generously drawn, perhaps—but a line nonetheless. Beyond that line you are no longer willing to forgive. Jesus calls into question the entire game. If you keep count, it is not called forgiveness.

So, then how are we to forgive? Following his instruction to Peter regarding the number of times he should forgive, Jesus reinforces the lesson with a parable. The servant owes ten thousand talents to the king. Calculating this number is nearly impossible. We quickly find that Jesus is using a number that has no realistic present day equivalency. Further, no king would loan an incalculably large amount to a servant. But, that is what this king is willing to loan and to forgive. When the servant then fails to forgive another for a remarkably small debt, his forgiveness is withdrawn and the king

has him thrown into jail. Again exaggeration seems to be the way Jesus makes his point here. He is using hyperbolic language to teach Peter and to teach us about the true nature of forgiveness.

By the time Matthew tells this story, Peter seems to have caught on a bit about Jesus. He knows that Jesus is a Messiah and that he doesn't think or act like other people, so he shows the master that he is learning. If he would have approached the question in the usual way, he might have said, "Shall I forgive as many as two or three times?" This would have been the rabbinic approach: to forgive, yes, but prudently. To forgive once is generous. To be let down by the same person and forgive a second time would be exemplary. To be fool enough to get hurt by the same individual a third time and to forgive even then: this is bordering on the obsessive. But, Peter knows that Jesus thinks big. He makes a bold move: "Forgive as many as seven times?" This would be absurd by rabbinic standards, but it might just be the number Jesus would like. It's a holy number and it has the kind of exaggerated quality that Jesus likes (you know, go the second mile; give your cloak as well). Sure, we imagine Peter thinking, Jesus will like this answer. Surely this shows strength of leadership, holy insight, generosity of spirit. Surely, this is an impressive demonstration of all that Peter has learned from the great teacher.

But then he listens as Jesus tells his story, echoing the Lord's Prayer's petition that we should forgive others *even as we have been forgiven*. Notice that Peter started this conversation asking Jesus for a *number*. He wants to know just how much will be expected of him, how much is reasonable, how much is required. And so he suggests what by all accounts is a more-than-sufficient amount of forgiveness.

Jesus, however, turns Peter's question on its head by replying with a ridiculous, even impossible reply. "You want to play the numbers game?" Jesus more or less asks, "okay, how about this one?" It's not that Jesus wants Peter to increase his forgiveness quota. It's that he wants him to stop counting altogether simply because forgiveness, like love, is inherently and intimately relational rather than legal, and therefore cannot be

counted. If Peter had asked Jesus how many times he should love his neighbor, we'd see his misunderstanding; love can't be quantified or counted. But he asks about forgiveness and we miss his mistake. We tend to treat forgiveness as a response to the law. You know, when someone screws up we can either punish or forgive that person.

Forgiveness is part of a faithful life, and Peter knows this. And most of us accept the premise that this is supremely important to Jesus - that Christians should forgive. What we struggle with is how to practice it.

How do we move from where we often find ourselves – hurt, angry, victimized, abused, alienated – to where we say “I am more than that. God calls me to be more than that.”? How do we get our minds and hearts from thoughts of anger and hurt and revenge to sincere forgiveness from our hearts? That is what Jesus wants from us!

So Jesus tells the story of the king and the servant. And we listen and we wonder: could a king be so extremely generous in forgiving such massive debt from a lowly slave? Well, the point is clear – that is how much God forgives each of us.

Then we wonder: could a slave, forgiven so extravagantly, then be so harsh with a fellow slave who had meager debts: Could someone actually walk out of the king's palace on a road paved by freedom and grace and then act with such cruelty to fellow slaves in debt? Well, the hyperbole makes the point – in fact, that is how we often live when we do not forgive.

Forgiveness in the Gospel of Matthew is not only relational it is reciprocal and reliant. When teaching his disciples to pray Jesus would have us say, “Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors”. This fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer is echoed in the lesson of this parable about the kingdom, reflecting it back in reverse. We ought to forgive as our King has forgiven us, Jesus says.

In answering the disciples' request for help in praying Jesus teaches them that forgiveness – both the giving and the receiving of it – is reciprocal; one cannot have it without doing it. “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses”. In answering Peter's request for help in understanding how far forgiveness needs to go Jesus teaches that God's forgiveness surpasses both our deserving and our comprehension of it; we who have first been forgiven must, therefore, forgive those who have wronged us so much more lightly.

One other thought: What if we read the judgment of the king another way? What if we imagine that rather than inflicting some new (or old) punishment on the unforgiving servant, the king is actually only describing the condition his servant *already lives in*. That is, he is already a slave to the world of counting and calculating and reckoning everything according to the law and will therefore remain a slave in that way of being until the end of time...or when he can forgive others, whichever comes first.

This isn't, I think, a softening of the parable but rather inviting the parable to push us to the very brink of our being. Forgiveness, you see, is ultimately a decision about the past – the decision to accept both that *you cannot change the past* and also that *the past does not have to hold you captive*. Forgiveness is a decision about the past that ultimately determines the future. When you forgive, you release the past and enter into an open future. When you cannot forgive, you remain captive to that past until the end of time. Forgiveness, in this sense, *is* freedom, freedom from the past, freedom for the future, the kind of freedom God wants for each of us.

I am reminded of the old saying about anger and hatred. To nurture our anger and hatred is like drinking poison hoping that it is going to kill the other person. And yet all it does is kill us and separate us from God's love. Seventy times seven! We forgive and forgive.

To forgive does not mean we condone what was done to us. To forgive does not mean we acquiesce or deny justice. To forgive means to refuse to let what happened destroy us and alienate us from God and from one another. It demands hard work and vigilance, but it is the way to life and discipleship and the way to God.

As faithful disciples, may we go that way. Amen.