

The last time I stood in this pulpit, I talked about the importance of geography when reading the bible. *Where* something happened was sometimes as important as *what* happened there. Well, this morning, I'm going to talk about the importance of math. Because numbers *also* matter, and often, in scripture, numbers point to something beyond themselves. Or they invite us to cast our minds back to other times a particular number has shown up in the story of God. Peter asks Jesus a question about forgiveness, and Jesus responds with a parable, which begins with a king requiring an accounting of his slaves. One of whom is said to owe him "ten thousand talents." Now, that sounds like a pretty big number, right? We might immediately think of 10,000 dollars, perhaps, which is hardly small change. However, it doesn't come *remotely* close to the number Jesus has just given, which is an *impossible* amount of money.

10,000 was the largest number that could be expressed in the Greek language. Literally, a 'myriad,' a word which has made its way into the English language, to mean a group of things that have an indefinitely large quantity. So, 10,000. Largest number available. A *talent* was the largest unit of currency at the time – 6,000 denarii – which is about 16 and a half years pay for a rural laborer, who were Jesus' audience. It represents possibly their entire life's earnings, given life expectancy was around 35. So, let's do the math. The largest number multiplied by the largest unit of currency. 10,000 talents. 60 million denarii.

To try and put this number into perspective, the annual tribute that Herod the Great was required to pay Rome for the territories of Judea and Perea was 200 talents: a fiftieth, or 2% of the debt the slave owed the king. This man owed the king more money than was in circulation in Judea at the time! Or, if this helps, if the US national debt now stands at 40 *trillion* dollars, this guy owes a *gazillion* dollars! So, when the crowd heard the size of the debt that was owed, they probably laughed, because it's a ridiculous number. It's the largest number there is, of the largest coin there is. They're in on the joke: it would be *impossible* to pay off such a debt, because it would have been impossible to *accrue* such a debt. The laughter continues as Jesus describes the slave falling to his knees and declaring, "Have patience with me, and I will pay everything." But the laughter would have stopped abruptly when Jesus said, "out of pity for the man, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him that debt." Because that would *never* have happened.

No ruler forgave an entire debt – it just didn't work like that. Nearly everyone there knew what it was to be in debt because only a tiny number of people were financially independent. And so to hear of someone's debt being forgiven, and an impossible debt at that, well, everyone would be leaning in to see where this story goes next. And where it goes, is that, this man who has just experienced the unimaginable, comes across a fellow slave who owes him 100 denarii. Not an insignificant amount, but a drop in the Mediterranean in comparison to the debt *he's* just been forgiven. And he demands repayment!

When his fellow slave begs *with exactly the same words* he's just spoken to the king, instead of paying that forgiveness forward, he has the man thrown into prison until he can pay the

debt. Which, he will not be able to, because he's in prison, and unable to work! This behavior would have scandalized Jesus' audience, and he puts their anger into the mouths of this ungrateful slave's peers, who complain to the king, and who, as we heard, responds to the ungrateful slave by having him tortured until he could pay off his entire debt – which, as we've already heard, was an impossible debt. Then Jesus wraps up the parable by saying “that's how God will treat anyone who refuses to forgive from the heart.” And with that declaration ringing in their ears, Jesus brings this lengthy series of instruction in Galilee to an end, and heads off for Judea. Well, that's the math. What are we to do with it?!

Let's begin by going back to Peter's original question. “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Peter's question appears to be related to what Jesus has just taught his disciples in the passage immediately preceding this one. Which begins with Jesus saying, “If another member of the church sins against you...” and then goes on to outline the ways in which you are to confront your fellow member, in order to encourage them to tell the truth about what they've done, so that you can be reconciled to them. Peter hears this process, ponders for a while, then asks the question that some of *us* have been tempted to ask when someone does us wrong: “Yeah, but how many *times* am I supposed to forgive that person?” “Because old Philip over there, well, you've seen how he is. So what, seven times? Does that sound about right? I mean, other rabbis teach that you only have to forgive someone *three* times before you can cut ties with them. So, seven? How does that sound?”

Some of you may have been wondering about the iconic cartoon on the cover of the bulletin when you sat down today. Maybe now that choice is beginning to make sense! How many times did Charlie Brown ask Lucy if she was going to pull the ball away, only to be assured, “No, of course not!” There's a compilation of some of those times on YouTube. It lasts 15 minutes, and there are more than seven occasions of Lucy whipping the ball away at the last second and Charlie Brown ending up on his back. So – at least in Peter's eyes – Charlie Brown can stop trusting her now. But Jesus responds to Peter's offer of seven times as the limit for forgiveness by saying, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, *seventy* seven times.” If you're following along in the King James Version, you'll have just read, “Seventy times seven times.” The math is a bit complicated grammatically here, because it's referencing a number that shows up in the Hebrew bible. And while the Hebrew Bible says “seventy seven times,” the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew bible) says “seventy *times* seven.” Regardless, considerably *more* than the *three* times Jesus' fellow rabbis taught. And the *seven* times Peter offered as a suggestion.

Now, that number isn't *just* Jesus taking Peter's number and playing with it. It's math that points back to some math at a much earlier stage of the Story of God. Almost all the way back to the beginning, in fact. It involves Lamech, who is the great, great, great, great-grandson of Adam and Eve. Who boasts to his wives one day, “You wives of Lamech, give heed to my speech. For I have killed a man for wounding me. I have killed a boy for striking me. If Cain is to be avenged sevenfold then Lamech is to have vengeance *seventy-*

sevenfold.” So the number Jesus gives Peter – seventy-seven –was not originally about *forgiveness*. It was about *vengeance*.

So, I wonder if Jesus gives Peter that number to aim for, as a way of saying, “All of what you’ve seen me do and say and teach is about breaking the cycle of sin and violence and death that is destroying us. The goal is always forgiveness and reconciliation. Or at least it should be.” Or, as N T Wright, my favorite British biblical scholar and theologian says, “If you’re still counting how many times you’ve forgiven someone, you’re not really forgiving them at all, but simply postponing revenge. ‘Seventy seven times’ is a typical bit of Jesus’ teasing. What he means, of course, is, “Don’t even think about counting. Just do it.” Which reminds me of a wonderful short story that Liz Orndorff wrote, entitled, “Mrs. McCafferty learns about forgiveness, and decides against it.” Mrs McCafferty is an Irish woman, whose husband continually does little things which irritate her. So she goes to the priest, and asks him what she should do about this, and he points to this parable as Jesus’ sage wisdom on the matter. You might already be able to imagine where the story goes from there! She gets a little book, and starts recording every instance when her husband “sins against her.” I won’t spoil the ending, but it takes place shortly after *she* does the math, and gets to the four hundred and ninety-*first* offense.

Any other scorekeepers out there? Anyone live *with* a scorekeeper? No need for a show of hands – you know who you are! I confess if I were a scorekeeper, the tally of times I’ve been the one in *need* of forgiveness would far outweigh the times I’ve needed to forgive someone else. Rebecca and I will celebrate our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary in just over a week’s time. We decided to use the traditional vows, but added one of our own: “I promise to always be coming to meet you,” which has certainly not been the easiest vow to keep at times. It largely depends on our ability to tell the truth to each other. To confess when we know we’ve hurt the other, and to do so quickly – to keep short accounts. To ask for forgiveness, and to extend it when asked. Sometimes, even *before* we’re asked. But it’s one thing to make that promise on the joy of your wedding day. It’s another thing entirely to keep that promise day to day in your marriage. Which you know if you have *any* kind of close relationship with another person. What goes unspoken can end up lying between you. Sometimes festering. Sometimes growing. Growing to the point where it’s hard to come to meet the other person, because that huge thing is in-between us now. And sometimes – often – that huge thing is made up of all the little things. The little things that went unconfessed. Unchallenged. Unacknowledged, perhaps. Except for Mrs McCafferty, who just made another note in her little book, as the poison that is resentment continued to grow.

So where does all this leave us this morning? One place it perhaps leaves us is with the reason the Reformed tradition doesn’t pray the King James Version of the Lord’s Prayer that I grew up with: “forgive us our trespasses...”, but instead prays, “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Which captures some of what Jesus is getting at in this parable, in that we can only ask God to forgive us to the degree that we forgive others. But we should be cautious about applying this universally, and without reference to the instruction that Jesus

gives immediately beforehand. I don't think Jesus is saying, "You should always forgive and forget – seventy-seven times at least!" Because the preceding instruction makes it very clear we are to seek *repentance* from our offender, in order that we might be fully reconciled to them. Too many people have been wounded by careless pastors and others with authority who have told congregants who have been profoundly sinned against that they should just "forgive and forget – as often as the other person does it." Too many women, especially, have suffered in abusive relationships because of this kind of pastoral malpractice. If I may quote N T Wright again on this point, "The key thing... is not that one should therefore swallow all resentment and 'forgive and forget' as though nothing had happened. The key thing is that one should never, ever give up making forgiveness and reconciliation one's goal. If confrontation has to happen, as it often does, it must always be with forgiveness in mind, never revenge."

"How often should I forgive? *Seven* times?"

"Not seven times, but, I tell you, *seventy* seven times."

"Forgive your debtors."

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

For, as Lewis B. Smedes once observed, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you."

Now, it would be remiss of me to end without at least acknowledging that difficult statement Jesus makes at the end of the parable: "In anger, the king handed his slave over to be tortured until he could pay his entire debt. So my heavenly father will also do to every one of *you*, if *you* do not forgive your brother or your sister from your heart." That sure sounds a lot like the kind of hellfire and brimstone preaching I heard growing up. I'm still not quite sure what to make of Jesus saying this, other than the fact that he has already used hyperbole to describe the debt owed. Perhaps he is also using hyperbole here in his description of God's judgment, in order to underline the importance of forgiveness. Perhaps. Perhaps not. Regardless, let us be those who are swift to own the ways we wound others. Let us be swift to forgive those who wound us, especially when they tell the truth about what they have done. May we be swift to reconcile – to come to meet each other. And in so doing, model something that is sorely needed in a world bent on vengeance. Bent on nursing old wounds, on rehearsing old insults. All the things that are tearing us apart as families, as communities, as nations. As a species. Let us be those who model reconciliation instead of revenge. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

May it be so.