

## God's Math

Matthew 18:21-35

Crossroads Christian Church

Romans 14:1-12

September 14, 2014 Pentecost 14 A

You may not know it, but you heard kind of a joke in the service today, before the sermon even started. I read it during the scripture reading. It was Jesus that said it originally. We call it the parable of the unforgiving servant. Scholars ponder over its meanings. But I'm sure that when Jesus told it, he received smiles, grins, knowing nods, and out-and-out laughter, and I'm equally sure that was the response he wanted. If you don't smile, at least inwardly, then you're not interpreting the biblical text properly. Many of the parables that Jesus told were great stories, or at least striking images. They were designed to get a reaction. Some worked for a reaction of shock and challenge, as in the case of the parable of the Good Samaritan, where most people's heroes became villains, and a "bad guy" became a hero. Some worked for a reaction of human interest and emotional involvement, such as the parable of the prodigal son. Some taught through humor, and this parable is one of those. We laugh first, as it engages us, and then we say, "Oh! I get it now."

Humor from the Jewish culture of that day was often based on exaggeration. As I told my children when they were younger, "If I told you once, I've told you a million times, don't exaggerate." If you blow something up big, out of proportion, it's funny, just like a cartoon caricature enlarging somebody's nose or ears. We'll talk about the exaggeration in this parable later. Another element of humor is surprise, when you expect one thing

and get another. Here's an example. A hotel was hosting 2 banquets in separate rooms—one was a group of traveling salesmen, the other the local ministerial association. The caterer planned the same menu for both, except that the salesmen got a watermelon spiked with whiskey for dessert, and the clergy a regular watermelon. After they were served, the caterer discovered to her horror that the watermelons had gotten mixed up. "Oh, no, those ministers are going to be so upset," she thought. She sent an assistant to check out the rooms. The salesmen were doing fine, since they didn't know the watermelon was supposed to be spiked. "What about the ministers? Were they outraged?" "No," said the helper. "They were too busy scooping the seeds into their pockets." That's surprise.

So let's look at our gospel lesson. Jesus has been trying to teach the disciples how to live lives that reflected God's kingdom. Last Sunday the Gospel lesson was about how conflicts should become opportunities for reconciliation. When someone wrongs you, you don't just bear it, you don't get even; rather, you work it out. Today's Gospel lesson starts with Peter asking a question. "Master, if someone wrongs you, how often do you forgive? Seven times?" Seven's a good holy number, and it shows you're a very patient person. Eye for an eye? Tooth for a tooth? No, forgiveness. Eye for an eye leaves both parties half-blind, Gandhi said. Jesus had already said, if someone slaps you, turn the other cheek. But how often? Seven's a pretty good number.

You're not even close, Jesus said. Try 70 times 7. At least that's the response most of us grew up hearing. Modern translations say "77" with a footnote saying "or 70X7") and I'm not sure which is most accurate. But in

any case, he means a whole big bunch. Now that was a response that must have left Peter's jaw hanging open. Perhaps he was trying to multiply  $70 \times 7$  in his head. How can I possibly keep track to know when I can stop forgiving? He might have wondered.

To illustrate his point, Jesus told the parable. Once there was a servant—not a business partner, not an employee, but a slave—who got caught when his master, the king, checked accounts. "According to these books, you owe me a fortune—ten thousand talents, to be exact." Now here's the first clue that Jesus was exaggerating for effect. A talent isn't equivalent to a dollar bill, or a five, or a twenty. It was probably over a hundred dollars—so we're talking well over a cool million here. So the king said, "Pay it back, or I'll throw you in prison and have you beaten until you do." The slave begged and pleaded, and said, "Please give me more time and I'll pay you back every cent." The king not only gave him more time, he forgave him, canceled the debt! "What's a million or so among friends?" So he walks away, forgiven and free. Can you imagine calling your credit card company or mortgage holder, to say you need more time before you can pay your bill? Will they slap you with a penalty? Probably, if they don't foreclose you first. Will they say, "Oh, just forget the whole thing. We'll just wipe out your debt." Yeah. Right.

Meanwhile, back to the slave, he sees another slave who owes him a buck ninety seven. So he insists on his money back, and when the other man asks for mercy, he chokes him and threatens to send him to debtor's jail. Other slaves saw what was going on and reported him back to the king. Oops! Once again, the slave is groveling before the throne. "Look how much I forgave

you, and you won't forgive your brother slave a few measly cents? I've changed my mind. Off to the dungeon with you."

A funny story, as I said. The ending isn't too funny, if you're the slave who owed the million, but you can see how Jesus made his point. No matter how much we forgive others for wronging us, it doesn't compare to the forgiveness that we've already received.

In another story, Jesus reminded Simon the Pharisee what he reminded Simon Peter of in our Gospel lesson—God has forgiven you so much more than you can ever imagine, so you need to let God's grace, love, and forgiveness work through you. That's why in the Lord's Prayer we say, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." If saying that doesn't scare you, you might want to think about it again. "God, be as forgiving to me as I am to others." But sometimes I like to hold grudges. I like to stay awake at night, stewing over some incident where someone has wronged me, and thinking about what I can do to get even. Do we want God to act that way toward us?

70 times 7—that's God's forgiveness math. Basically, Jesus was telling Peter to make forgiveness a habit—to make it come naturally—so when the 490<sup>th</sup> time comes, you've lost count and you keep on forgiving.

Forgiveness can stop vicious circles of violence. Forgiveness is a necessary step in reconciliation, bringing two estranged people or groups back together again. Forgiveness brings inner healing in our own lives, as we let go of our grudges. When the all-white government of the Union of South Africa toppled, many feared a bloodbath. But white and black men of goodwill helped the transition to happen peacefully. Archbishop

Desmond Tutu led a national panel on forgiveness, where the racial crimes of the past were looked at, and reconciliation and forgiveness were worked out.

Forgiveness doesn't mean being a doormat, though. Often, churches have enabled cycles of violence and addiction to go on until someone ends up dead, by saying to the battered spouse or the spouse of an alcoholic or addict, "Forgive your spouse, if he or she says, 'I'm sorry.' Go back and give your spouse another chance." You can forgive somebody by offering up your anger and hurt to God, and by putting aside the desire to hurt the other person, and still not go back and become a victim again. Going back to be a victim isn't what God wants, and it isn't what's best for the other person, because it allows the other person to go back to the old destructive behaviors again.

In our Epistle lesson, Paul reminds us to be open to differences, not to let the little things get in our way of loving our brothers and sisters. God's mercy is as wide as the sea, God's judgment is so loving that we are called to be kind and caring to others, not to pass judgment on them.

But the final word in forgiveness wasn't in this parable that we heard today. The final word comes from the cross, where people trying to protect the status quo hung a good man out to die. "Father, forgive them. For they don't know what they are doing." Jesus on the cross forgave those who were killing him. And not just them, but us, too, for all the little ways that we have ignored or gone against God's love. And forgiving, loving, gracious Jesus has invited us to a way of life that brings forgiveness, love and grace alive in our world. Amen.