

(1st Sunday in Lent)

Rev. Scott Marrese-Wheeler
March 10, 2019

Matthew 18:21-34

Jimmy Buffett has a song that could be the theme song for the 4 out of 3 people who struggle with math, me being one of them: **"Geometry, trigonometry and if that don't tax your brain, There are numbers to big to be named, Numerical precision is a science with a mission, And I think it's gonna drive me insane, math suks!"**

Math is my least favorite subject. I get "Math Anxiety" when I am asked to sub in those classes. So with that in mind, let's do some math this morning.

Let's start with a story problem. A guy named Peter is a member of a church. Another member of the church "sins" against him. He knows he is to forgive this person, but struggles with doing so. He asks the Teacher if he adds $4+3$ and gets 7, if this is the correct answer?

The Teacher replies, no, try multiplication instead. How about 70×7 ? You do the math now. $70 \times 7 = 490$ times. Simple enough answer, isn't it? Or is it?

Let's move on to a more challenging math problem.

A person is in debt, owing Ten Thousand Talents. One Talent equals 15 years of wages. How many years of wages does the worker owe? If this worker's wage is, say \$15 an hour, and he has only been hired to work 30 hours a week (so his employer doesn't have to pay him full-time benefits) his salary per week is \$450. If he works gets paid when he works, so on average, he works 50 weeks a year due to vacation and medical reasons, this worker makes \$22,500 a year. That's not much to live on these days.

Now if this worker has gone in debt, owing 10,000 Talents, and again a Talent being equal to 15 years of salary, so he owes 150,000 years worth of salary. So if he worked 15 years, he would make \$337,000. Now if we multiple $337,000 \times 10,000$ we get the answer of \$3,370,000,000.00!

And that is if he only used the money he made to pay off just his debt, with nothing left over to live on! It would be impossible to pay off this kind of debt, wouldn't it? Think about your own yearly income before expenses. If you were in a similar position, how could you ever pay it off?

Matthew uses hyperbole in the telling of Jesus' story on the debt owed to the king by his servant. Tennessee Ernie Ford was right, when he sang, "Saint Peter don't you call me, cause I can't go. I owe my soul to the company store."

The debt owed is astronomical, if not a bit comical too. The king is ready to throw the servant, his wife, and children in debtors prison, when the servant begs for mercy, "Be patient with me and I will pay back everything I owe you!"

Think about it, there is no way, he is ever going to be able to pay back his debt.

So the king has compassion on him, showing him mercy. He forgives the servant's entire debt! While that was an extremely generous act of forgiveness, it was not an easy thing for the king to do. He is now out over 3 billion dollars! What a gift!

Now you would think the servant would be grateful, learning the true meaning of forgiveness. Yet the king's generosity fails to make the servant empathetic towards others, who like him, also have debts to pay, in this case, to him.

Showing no mercy to another person who owes him a hundred denarii, which amounts to a few months wages, he has this guy thrown in debtors prison until such time as he can pay.

One who is shown compassion and offered forgiveness, shows no empathy towards another, refusing to forgive as freely as he has been forgiven.

And here is the troubling part of Jesus story. What do we make of a God who freely forgives when gratitude is expressed but not offered to others in return? Jesus says of those followers who do not show mercy or have compassion, who are unable to offer forgiveness towards others will be shown no mercy by God!

Forgiving others as freely as God has forgiven you is not an easy thing.

Forgiveness can be a challenging thing for us. It is not as simple as "Forgive and Forget and Move On" with our lives, no big deal. Learning to forgive as Christ taught us to is perhaps the most difficult spiritual practice we can engage in as followers of Jesus.

I really like what **Jan Richardson** has to say about the true nature of Forgiveness. In her blog, **The Painted Prayerbook**, she reflects on Jesus' parable in Matthew, writing:

"As I've been pondering this parable of Jesus—one of his most challenging, which is really saying something—I have found myself wondering how many of us have absorbed any of these (myths) beliefs about forgiveness:

- Forgiveness means excusing or overlooking the harm that has been done to us and saying that everything is okay.
- Forgiveness means allowing those who have hurt us to persist in their behavior.
- Forgiving requires forgetting what has happened.
- Forgiveness is something we can do at will, and always all at once.

If we have absorbed any of these **distorted** beliefs about forgiveness, it can come as both a shock and a relief to learn that such ideas would be foreign to Jesus.

Clearly he expects us—requires us—to forgive. Yet in his teaching about forgiveness, nowhere does Jesus lay upon us the kinds of burdens we have often placed upon ourselves—burdens that can make one of the most difficult spiritual practices nearly impossible.

The heart of forgiveness is not to be found in excusing harm or allowing it to go unchecked. It is to be found, rather, in choosing to say that although our wounds will change us, we will not allow them to forever define us. **Forgiveness does not ask us to forget the wrong done to us but instead to resist the ways it seeks to get its poisonous hooks in us.**

Forgiveness asks us to acknowledge and reckon with the damage so that we will not live forever in its grip.

Sometimes we are given the grace to forgive quickly.

Sometimes the grace to forgive takes a long, long time to receive.

And so forgiveness often requires practice. It takes choosing to work at it. We might have to chip away at it again and again and again. Seventy-seven times, at least, as Jesus says in this passage.

Forgiveness might well be the hardest blessing we will ever offer—or receive. As with any difficult practice, it's important to ask not only for the strength we will need for it, but also the grace: the grace that will, as we practice again and again, begin to shimmer through our wounds, drawing us toward the healing and freedom we could hardly have imagined at the outset.

Is there some forgiveness you are being asked to practice? Are there any ideas about forgiveness that you might need to release—or take on—in order to enter this practice? How might it be to ask not only for the strength but also for the grace you need to forgive another—or yourself?

The Hardest Blessing

If we cannot
lay aside the wound
then let us say
it will not always
bind us.
Let us say
the damage
will not eternally
determine our path.

Let us say
the line of our life
will not forever follow
the tearing, the rending
we have borne.

Let us say
that forgiveness
can take some practice,
can take some patience,
can take a long
and struggling time.

Let us say
that to offer
the hardest blessing
we will need
the deepest grace,
that to forgive
the sharpest pain
we will need
the fiercest love,
that to release
the ancient ache
we will need

new strength
for every day.

Let us say
the wound
will not be
our final home;
that through it
runs a road,
a way we would not
have chosen
but on which
we will finally see
forgiveness,
so long practiced,
coming toward us
shining with the joy
so well deserved.

Amen.