

Date: September 11, 2005

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 24

**SERMON: Doing the Math of Forgiveness**

Text(s): Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

© 2005 L. R. Kalajainen

Two women had once been close friends in college, but afterward, their lives had taken different paths. A number of years later, their paths crossed, and they decided to have lunch together to catch up on each other's life. As such reunions often do, this one went on for several hours. Suddenly they realized that they had talked through the afternoon and right on into the dinner hour. Feeling guilty that their husbands were probably at home about to call the police and the hospitals to see if they had met with some disaster, they hurriedly took their leave, promising to phone each other the next day to pick up where they left off. (I should mention that this story took place before the widespread use of cell phones, so we have to imagine what life was like in such antediluvian times.)

When they did phone each other the next day, one said to the other, "Was your husband angry when you got home so late?"

"Oh, no, it was OK. I told him how I had run into an old school friend, and that we got carried away with our reunion, and he didn't mind. How about yours?"

"Well," the other woman replied, "my husband was so angry he became historical."

"You mean *hysterical*, don't you," her friend said.

"No, I mean *historical*. He brought up everything I've done to make him angry in the past fifteen years."

I suspect that all of us have a tendency to be historians of past injuries or wrongs that we've suffered at the hands of someone else. I'll leave it to you to decide who's the historian at your house. I can only bear witness that it helps to have daughters, whose first response when either of their parents shows signs of becoming historical, is "Get over it!" Our younger daughter

Kate recently added another appropriate response to our family repertoire that she picked up while teaching at the International School in Berlin. Her new favorite response when someone is becoming "historical" or simply indulging in self-pity over some trivial matter is "Pick up the shattered pieces of your life and move on."

Our gospel lesson today speaks to this tendency we have to become historical in our relationships. Forgiveness is not something that any of us find easy, I suspect. We're all pretty good historians when it comes to keeping score of wrongs done to us by others. But before delving into our text, it will be helpful to first see the context in Matthew has set it.

Matthew has arranged the sayings attributed to Jesus which he has gathered from his sources into five "sermons" or "discourses" which provide the structure for the whole Gospel. The whole of chapter 18 is the fourth of these five discourses, and it deals with the kind of interpersonal relationships there ought to be within the Christian community. It's a sort of Manual of Church Membership. So Peter's question about forgiveness and the parable has to be understood primarily within this context which Matthew sets for it. This is not about how we set up a judicial system for society or how we engage in foreign relations, though certain principles might carry over. It's primarily about how Christians are to relate to each other.

Peter's question is the occasion for Jesus' telling the parable, "*Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how many times must I forgive that person—as many as seven times?*" Peter probably thought he would earn Jesus' approval with that question. After all, forgiving the same person seven times is surely the mark of a generous spirit. But Jesus' answer must have rocked Peter back on his heels. "*Not seven times, Peter, but seventy times seven!*" And then comes this parable which drives home the point with absolute crystal clarity.

A wealthy man decides to call in a debt that one of his servants owes him. This is not

just any debt, however; the debt is impossibly large. Ten thousand talents of silver may not sound like all that much to those of us who are used to reading about corporations who announce revenue shortfalls in the hundreds of millions of dollars, or national debts in the trillions of dollars. But if we do the math, we discover that 10,000 talents was the equivalent of 150,000 years worth of wages for a daily laborer! Who could ever repay such a staggering debt? Who could ever have even incurred such a debt to begin with? Well, that's the point you see. The debt is incalculable. It's not only beyond any ability to repay, it's beyond any ability even to comprehend. The servant's plea for patience until he can pay is really just an absurd face-saving tactic. He can never pay this debt, and both he and the master know it. The master, in an act of generosity that is as incalculable as the debt itself, releases the servant from the debt and sets him free. He forgives him.

The servant, in turn, has a colleague who owes him a relatively trivial debt—an amount equal to only three months worth of wages for a daily worker. You don't have to be a Bowdoin math professor to calculate this one. As we say, it's "do-able." Yet the servant who has just received such incredible mercy and forgiveness from his own master, is unwilling to extend the same treatment to his fellow servant. When the master hears about it, he commands that the incalculable debt owed him by the unforgiving servant be reinstated, and the unforgiving servant arrested and thrown into prison until he pays the whole thing, which of course, he has no hope of ever doing.

If the purpose of a parable is to hold up a mirror for us to look into, what do we see when we look into this one? We see, first of all, that we're all in the position of the first servant in the story; every one of us owes an incalculable debt to God. Our very life is God's gift, and so all of us owe our very lives to God. This is a hard notion for Americans to get our minds around.

We think of ourselves as self-reliant, independent, and self-made. But, in fact, we're not. Our very existence is a debt that we owe. Nor is that debt incalculable because each of us has committed so many sins as to run up such an enormous debt. None of us could be that great a sinner. Not even Adolph Hitler or Osama bin Laden or Martha Stewart could be such great sinners. There's no math that can calculate our debt to God. We are born into a world where wrong has become entrenched within the deepest fibers of human society and human moral decision-making and human relationships and human institutions. Thousands of generations of petty and not-so-petty sins have bent the world away from God's creative intentions for it. And when we are born into a bent world, there's no possibility of growing up straight, at least not with any resources that we can muster ourselves. This is what the old theologians meant when they spoke of "original sin," even if they were mistaken about it being transmitted biologically.

This may be difficult to understand, but perhaps an analogy with our individual relationship to the national debt of our country may help us grasp this. None of us is individually responsible for the enormous national deficit. All of us probably contribute to that national debt in some way, great or small, by the personal economic decisions we make, but none of us individually could be said to be responsible for the size of the national debt. Nevertheless, it is our debt. We're all saddled with it, it affects our life in large and small ways, and all of us are accountable for it whether or not we even understand how it got to be such a big debt. I may make perfectly sensible and prudent personal economic decisions, but the size of the national debt is still going to have an impact on my life, whether I want it to or not. My country is in debt, so I'm in debt. And so it is with our moral debt to God; humanity is in debt, so I'm in debt. I can't escape it.

I'm not suggesting that our individual

moral decisions and our personal sins are not important. They are enormously important. That is why we cannot totally absolve ourselves from responsibility for the tragic events and moral evils so visible in our world. There's something a little incongruous, isn't there, when we complain about the oil companies that are reaping record-breaking profits from the high gas prices while we continue to insist on our right to drive gas-guzzling cars or have watch our investment portfolios grow with stocks from those same oil companies. None of us has totally clean hands. Only if we recognize that we are all bound together in systemic structures of moral evil, so that we are incalculably in debt to God, can we have the hope of being set free from that debt.

The only recourse we have is to do what this servant in the parable did—plead for mercy. That is why for nearly two thousand years, one of the elements of the liturgy of the church has been the prayer which we call by its Greek title, the *Kyrie Eleison*, which means, “Lord, have mercy on us.” How else could we presume to come into God's presence, except with a plea for mercy, and how could we draw our next breath if God were not merciful.

Yet such mercy is enormously costly. It is the master in the story who bears the cost of the absurdly large debt, who is 10,000 talents poorer when all is said and done. To forgive means accepting the cost of the other's wrongdoing. To forgive means releasing the offender from the obligation, which means that we, the offended, bear the cost of the other's wrongdoing. And yet, that, the parable suggests, is exactly what God does for us who owe such an incalculable debt. Who can ever look at the cross of Jesus Christ and not see there the high cost to God of our forgiveness?

That willingness of God to bear the high cost of forgiving the enormous human debt is the higher mathematics in all of this; we can't comprehend it; we can only recognize it and humbly accept it. God's forgiveness of us, then

becomes the basis for the lower mathematics—the elementary arithmetic involved in our forgiveness of others who have wronged us. And that's where our text is today directs our focus—not on the incalculable debt that all of us owe to God, but on those much smaller debts we owe to one another. Clearing those debts demands a willingness to be as forgiving to others as God has been forgiving to us. And here's where the story takes on such a terrifying aspect for us; here is where it moves from the realm of the incomprehensible mercy and grace of God to the very comprehensible realm of our own not-so-merciful relationships.

Like the servant who, having been forgiven himself, refused to forgive the sins of his fellow servant, we often fail to act like God and forgive our fellow-servants. We all want to have our own debts cancelled; we all want to have our own offenses treated with mercy, but we are very reluctant to extend the same mercy to those who have wronged us. To forgive means accepting the pain, accepting the cost, and letting the one who has caused the pain go free. And that seems terribly hard. It's why we find it so difficult to forgive. We don't really know whether we can let go of our need to punish. We don't know whether we can give up the right to become historical. And yet, until we do, no healing can come, either for ourselves or for the one who has offended us.

However, I want to be perfectly clear that forgiving someone and bearing the cost of the wrong done to us does not mean silently bearing abuse or wrongdoing or letting it go unaddressed. That's not forgiveness; that's just denial or moral cowardice, and it's the cause of a great deal of our unhappiness and at the root of many of our deepest neuroses. In fact, great harm has sometimes been done by pastors or well-meaning friends or family members who advocate a cheap kind of forgiveness that is no forgiveness at all, but just a “sweeping under the rug” so to speak of grievous wrongs. Forgiveness

doesn't mean accepting wrongs done to us without confronting the wrongdoer. Forgiveness and healing can only be experienced when both the wrongdoer and the one wronged are engaged with each other in seeking reconciliation, and it is costly for both the one doing the forgiving and the one receiving the forgiveness.

And yet, while forgiveness is costly, and while the pain of injured feelings or the sense of betrayal may be so great that we think we cannot forgive like God, it's not necessarily as difficult as we think, either.

C. S. Lewis, in a profound little book he wrote just months before his death, tells of discovering this fact in his own life. He says, "*Last week, while at prayer, I suddenly discovered—or felt as if I did—that I had really forgiven someone I have been trying to forgive for over thirty years. Trying and praying that I might. When the thing actually happened to me—as suddenly as a radio being turned off—my feeling was, 'But it's so easy. Why didn't I do it ages ago?'*" Because ages ago, he wasn't ready for the letting go that is so essential to forgiveness. It took him that long to come to the point where he was willing to bear the cost of forgiving the other person. Depending on the severity of the wrong, it may take a longer or shorter time and much prayer to get ourselves ready to let go of the debt we feel is owed to us by someone else.

But let it go we must if we are going to find healing and freedom for ourselves. We have to learn how to keep very short accounts. Don't accrue resentments. In other words, don't become historical. St. Paul says, "*Love keeps no account of wrongdoing, but delights in the truth.*" Freedom, a new beginning for ourselves and for the one we've forgiven, begins when we wipe the ledger clean and write "Cancelled" over the debts owed to us.

Jesus' parable ends on a sobering note: "*Neither will your Heavenly Father forgive every*

*one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from the heart.*" God will forgive anything, this parable seems to be saying, except the refusal to forgive others. Isn't this what we pray each week, *Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors?*" Why is our own forgiveness dependent on our willingness to forgive? Not because God has arbitrarily decreed it so, but because, as Dag Hammarskjöld reminded us, "Refusal to forgive another breaks the bridge over which we ourselves must pass." Refusal to forgive is more harmful than the original offense, for it poisons our ability to love. And if we cannot love, we cannot have God, for God is love. In the end, extending forgiveness to others is in our own best self-interest. When we forgive others, we heal ourselves.