

September 1, 2014 - Matthew 18:21- 35
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Counting on Forgiveness

Today's gospel continues where last week's left off, with the very next verse, with the very same topic, with a conversation that could be a summary of last week—those steps about what to do when someone sins against you. Last week the gospel said that step after step there's tenacity for reconciliation. Today's conversation between Jesus and Peter continues that theme. I'm sure Peter thought he was being tenacious when he came to Jesus with a follow-up question, "If another member sins against me, how often should I forgive them?" I'm betting Peter paused a minute then, before he continued, "As many as seven times?" It's clear Peter thought that the number he suggested was way, way high. Maybe he was even waiting for Jesus to say, "No, not that much, let it go once, oh, even twice. But three strikes you're out."

Of course Jesus didn't say that. No baseball, yet. If you already know what Jesus says (and you should all know, because you just heard me read it), if you already know how their conversation continues, maybe you think Peter's suggested seven is puny. But pause for a moment; think how much any batter who's ever struck out would have welcomed 4 more good pitches. And think how much more generous Peter's suggestion is than that saying: "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." I think that saying conveys something like, "Well, I'll forgive you, but I'm an idiot if I let it go more than once." Peter's suggestion is much, much bigger than that. It's like seven times bigger.

Of course, Jesus' number is much bigger than that. "Not seven times," Jesus says, "but seventy-seven times." Interestingly enough, there's a footnote next to that number in many Bibles, because there's a question of translation, of textual variants. In some Bibles there's a different number, and you might have also heard that number, heard that Jesus says, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven." As in 490. That's an even bigger number.

I think it's wonderfully fitting that we're not sure about the translation here. I love that we don't know exactly which number Jesus says is the number of times you should forgive, because, of course, the point is it's not about the number. Forgiveness is not about counting. That's what Jesus is saying, to Peter, and to us. Forgiveness is not about counting. Jesus is saying, "If you have to count, you're not being forgiving." I heard another pastor put it like that and I thought, "That is so true. That is so true—of me." Can't we all think of a person for whom we are keeping a tally, adding up all the ways that they've done us wrong? We've got a special record book about it written on our hearts, and we can recite its entries: "They've done this, and I've let it go. And then this, and I've let it go. And then this..." Which of course begs the question, have you really let it go? No, Jesus says. Forgiveness is not about keeping count. Being forgiving is much bigger than that. Forgiveness is a changed heart, and a renewed spirit, and a reconciled relationship. Forgiveness is not about a ledger book.

But then today's gospel continues, and we get this parable, with its ledger book, with its reckoning and debts. We get this parable, which is also about forgiveness, and in which people are definitely keeping count.

Right off the bat, I think we have to acknowledge the strange, even disturbing elements to this parable. It's introduced in a typical parable form with "The kingdom of heaven is like..." Then it talks about a king, so there's a natural tendency to think the king represents God. But this king has slaves, and is all too eager to sell off a slave, and the slave's wife and children. To American ears with our sinful history of slavery, we can't say that's like God.

The parable's characterization of the king improves as the story continues: we see that he's capable of pity, and is generous, forgiving that first slave a very large sum of money. But later, this king gets really angry with that first slave, and orders that he be tortured. Again, not a way to think of God: as singularly focused on exacting back payment for a personal I O U; God as divine torturer. Even Jack Bauer only resorted to torture to save the president, or Los Angeles, or the world, from nuclear destruction.

Maybe you are unfamiliar with Agent Bauer. He was a character from the TV show *24*. (doot, doot...) *24* was almost comic in its intensity and exaggeration. Today's parable, while intense and in some ways disturbing, has something comic about it, too. Some of this comes out when you translate the monetary units. Let's do the numbers. Jesus says that the first slave owes ten thousand talents. One talent was worth more than fifteen years of labor. The first slave owes 10,000 of them. 15 years times 10,000—that means that first slave owes 150,000 years of salary. That's a way, way high number. In today's terms, that's two and a quarter trillion dollars. That's a little less than the GDP of the entire United Kingdom—still including Scotland. How is it even possible for one person to run up that kind of a bill?! And how exactly could you pay it back at the same time as being tortured?! Even Jack Bauer couldn't do that. Meanwhile, the other slave owes a hundred denarii, a denari being about a day's labor, so a hundred days of pay. At today's minimum wage that's \$6,600. Not a small sum, for sure, but a fraction of what the first slave owed. Yet that first very indebted and forgiven slave, does not offer it to the second much less indebted slave. Eventually this gets the first slave tortured. Seems this king is more of a "Fool me once..." kind of a guy.

It's a strange parable, but we should admit that this too is typical of parables. Few parables are as simple as they seem, as straightforward as, "This is like this." But it is not strange that Jesus tells this parable just after his conversation with Peter, for it adds crucial elements to our understanding of forgiveness. Briefly, I count three.

One: in this parable, the person who can forgive is in a position of power. The king can forgive the first, deeply indebted slave. That first slave could have forgiven the second slave who owed money to him. There is a power differential. I think this makes the point that forgiveness is a privilege. Forgiveness is a kind of richness. Forgiveness is something you can bestow. Forgiveness is something you can share with someone beholden to you in some way. It is your privilege to forgive them. That's the direction of forgiveness in this story. This parable does not say to someone who has no power, to someone who is oppressed or abused, "You must forgive your torturer." We know that Jesus did that; that from the cross Jesus said, "Father forgive them..." That he does so shows the very power of God, a power God wants to share with us, the power of forgiveness.

Second, the parable shows how that power, unused, can turn against you. The parable shows the misuses of power, how easily and quickly the oppressed becomes the oppressor. That's what happened to the first slave. The king took that ginormous bill, and ripped it to shreds, but the pieces hadn't even fallen to the floor before the first slave grabbed the second slave by the throat. The violence was almost immediate, and eventually settled back on him. If forgiveness is a privilege, being unforgiven is a prison, a self-perpetuated torture.

Third and finally, there is an accounting. The forgiven are accountable. The richness that we receive requires something of us. It is both gift and pledge. We ask for it, and we commit to it. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive one another."

God is not keeping a ledger book of our 77 or 70 times 7 or 7 trillion sins. Divine forgiveness is not about keeping count. "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting our sins," Paul writes, "not counting our sins, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." God is not keeping a ledger book, but God is counting, on us.