September 17, 2017
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Matthew 18:21-35

Higher Math

Today's sermon has mathematical themes, because of Peter, the disciple, and a question he asks about discipleship. Peter asks Jesus, "How many times should we forgive? As many as seven times?" This is math at its simplest, the very first math we learn, that is, counting. For Peter, it's not even complicated counting, doesn't get to double digits; you have more than enough fingers for it: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. It's like the days of the week: as many as seven. Should we forgive as many as that? Jesus answers in two ways. There's Jesus' first answer, which is numerical; and then Jesus answers with an illustration, a story that has both numbers and mathematical principles.

Jesus' first answer does not follow Peter's counting cue, but takes it up a step to multiplication, a more advanced math than one two three. When one of my cousins was just learning to count he did it like this, "One, two, three, five, nine, lot of 'em, lot of 'em." That's actually more accurate than the count that Peter suggests: "as many as seven." Jesus says, "Not just seven, seventy-seven. Not just the set you suggested, Peter, thinking you were counting quite high, not just that set, a set of sets. Lot of 'em, lot 'em. Take what you thought was a lot, and take that times eleven. Once a day is not enough, you must forgive every day, multiple times. Which is to say, repeatedly.

This is a difficult. This is a difficult saying by Jesus. If it left Peter speechless—notice that Peter doesn't have anything else to say in the passage—if it sounded like a calculation Peter wasn't sure he could do, I know how he feels. It's hard to hear you must forgive a wrong, multiple times. I'm not just talking about when someone does the same wrong thing again and again—though that is often the case, and that is often how this saying is interpreted: someone does something wrong, forgive them. They do it again. Forgive them again. They do it again, forgive them again. Keep forgiving them, repeatedly. I do think Jesus is saying that here. I must also say that there's a danger to this interpretation. There's a danger when Jesus' saying becomes the exponential opposite of "three strikes you're out," as if no sin should ever get called "out." Jesus does not say that. Jesus called many sins out. Jesus called sins out repeatedly. Jesus also called out forgiveness, repeatedly, infinitely.

I think there is yet another difficult aspect to this saying, though, too. I think when Jesus says that a wrong must be forgiven, again and again, Jesus doesn't just mean wrongs that keep on happening, he also means the original wrong. That one also needs repeated forgiveness. That is also hard, and I know how that feels, too. I will think I am over something, a way in which I was poorly treated, something hurtful, wrong, that was done to me. Maybe it happened quite some time ago. Maybe I've come to a kind of understanding, am now in a different place, am a different person. I'll think that. And then something calls it to mind, something reminds me of that old hurt. And it still hurts. It flares up fresh, the pain that I suffered, it is still inside of me, still needs to be forgiven, again.

Which is to say: forgiveness is not just something you bestow on someone else; forgiveness includes release internally as well. Forgiveness includes letting go of the sin done to you, letting it out, instead of letting it curve you inward, make you bitter, bear grudges, nurse wounds. It is so hard not do that. Jesus asks such difficult things.

And Jesus tells such difficult stories. Jesus has yet more to say on this question of forgiveness. Jesus proceeds with part two of his answer to a now speechless Peter by telling a

parable. A word about parables, which are numerous in the gospel. In the weeks to come we'll hear seven more of them—and none of them are easy. It can be helpful, I think, with parables, to think of a math term, that sounds a lot like "parable." It's a term taught in more advanced math, later algebra, the term is "parabola." Parabolas, as you may recall, are what you get when you take a type of equation, a quadratic function, and plot it on x and y axes. You don't have to remember that, just remember what parabolas look like: great arcs. When you graph quadratic functions onto a grid you get soaring curves that swoop off of the page and into infinity. I think it's helpful to remember that picture of a parabola when reading parables, because parables have realistic points, you could plot parts of them onto life's positives and negatives, but then these great stories swoop, arc away from life as we know it, curve beyond comprehension.

Today's parable does this in a number of ways. There's the math of it, the money, the debts that are owed. We might miss this because we use dollars, not denarii, but this is how the numbers translate. In today's terms. the first person in the parable owes the equivalent of a year's salary. That's a lot of money, but that's not what he owes, he owes a year's salary times 150,000. When I tried plugging that into my calculator I couldn't understand what it said, the screen showed a number with decimal and a small case "e". How does one become indebted by such an incomprehensible amount? Even more incomprehensible, it's all forgiven. But then that same person, who is forgiven an incomprehensible amount, does not forgive another person who owes a couple months' rent. And so then that first person, who was forgiven but did not forgive, is thrown in jail and will be tortured until he pays. But how, in prison, while being tortured, can you pay back a debt?

It's a difficult parable, hard to understand—except for how clearly it presents that forgiveness, like math, must have a reflexive quality. We know this about forgiveness, that it must be reflexive, we say it, we pray it: "forgive us our sins, forgive us our debts, forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." The parable begs credulity—except for that all too often, every day, we make people pay who have no way of doing so. The swerving story resists application to reality—except for how tortured we are by our lack of forgiveness: towards others, towards ourselves. There are few prisons more terrible than regret. Are there any chains harder to break than shame?

Perhaps you, too, can think of something you've done, that you feel bad about. Maybe it was a long time ago, but still it flashes up, makes your insides clench every time you think of it. A theology professor I know says that, "There are no sins that Jesus loves to forgive more than old sins, sins that have been already forgiven." Jesus forgives those sins, too. Jesus especially loves to forgive those sins, sins we cannot. Jesus forgives them every day of creation, every day of the week, and twice on Sunday. Seventy-seven times on Sunday.

We hear that, here, at the beginning of worship. We hear that this very difficult thing, forgiveness, has already been done for us. We cannot quantify it, we can only receive it: we are saved by grace, as the reformers reaffirmed. We cannot quantify it, we can only receive it, and repeat it, every day, as Martin Luther affirmed in the very first of his 95 Theses, which says "When Christ said, ``Repent'' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." We cannot quantify, we can only practice it, again and again, plug ourselves into God's gracious equation and experience infinity.