
Bad Math

Matthew 18:21-35

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 13, 2020 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

The kingdom of heaven loves bad math. Maybe I'm overstating it. But Jesus surely makes it seem this way. He's always telling stories or performing actions where the math just doesn't add up. Whether he's feeding 5000 people with five loaves or teaching his disciples about leaving 99 sheep to find 1 lost one, in regular tables and scales of calculation, the math does not work. It's bad math. My 4th grader is working on balanced math these days, and even he could tell you the calculations Jesus does throughout the gospels and in our story today do not add up to a balanced scale. It's bad math.

Leading up to our story today, Jesus has been teaching the disciples about the kingdom of heaven, the place and time where God reigns and rules, where God's ways are the ways of life and community. Right before the story from our Gospel lesson, Jesus was teaching about what accountability and restoration within the community of Christ followers should look like. He offered guidance for how to address when someone has sinned against you, whether they take ownership of it or not.

Peter—the disciple who so often gets it right and then wrong—hears this conversation about being sinned against and the process of restoration, and he asks Jesus about the frequency of forgiveness. Of course, Peter assumes, like we all so easily do, that he will be the one who will be sinned against rather than the one sinning against others. Isn't it so human to assume we'll be the one in the right and others will be doing the wrong? We assume our decisions, actions, plans, and beliefs are the right, just, and good ones. So like Peter, we think what we need to prepare for is how we'll respond when others get it wrong. I suspect that Peter thought his suggestion for forgiveness was magnanimous, perhaps even over the top. Maybe he even had kingdom math on his mind when he said, "If my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 7 times is a lot really. You know the saying, "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." Now it's, "Sin against me once, I forgive you... Sin against me 8 times, I'm over it."

I wonder what kind of offenses Peter had on his mind. Was he thinking about the people who would cut him off on the road, go around him in the grocery line, exclude him from a friend group? Was he thinking about the little offenses or harms done that add up like mosquito bites or butterknife cuts to create extensive pain over time—the things often called microaggressions? Or was he thinking about the seemingly greater sins—things like the spreading of lies that ruins one's reputation, or being cheated out of a job, or having a violent crime committed against you or a loved one? Whatever was on his mind, seven seemed sufficient.

But Jesus's response surprises and shocks. Not seven times. Seventy-seven times. He could have said a million. Maybe that is why the number can be read as seventy times seven instead of seventy-seven. Seven acts of forgiveness you can keep track of. Seventy-seven or four hundred ninety not so much. Jesus doesn't really seem concerned with the numbers. Actually, his point is forgiveness is not about the math, or counting, or adding up in any way. Forgiveness doesn't add up in the math of the world that relies on the scales being even. But forgiveness does add up in the math of the kingdom. So Jesus is saying, "Don't even start counting when it comes to the

transgressions of others against you, as if eventually you'll balance the scales for your justice.” Today we imagine justice as balanced scales—a blindfolded woman measuring to make sure each side is even. But Jesus's form of communal restoration, reconciliation, and justice doesn't rely on a balanced scale. As it turns out, Jesus is not too concerned about balanced scales when it comes to being the kind of forgiving community he calls his followers to be. Instead, Jesus's way of making things right within God's kingdom relies on the immeasurable weight of God's mercy, forgiveness, and grace.

Jesus tells a story revealing as much. The kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who decided to settle his accounts with his servants. In the context of Jesus's world, these servants were likely to have been working for the king, potentially people in charge of gathering the king's taxes or the payments owed to the empire. The time had come for the servants to show how faithful they had been in their responsibilities. They needed to give account of their actions—to tell the truth of their deeds done. One of the servants owed the king ten thousand talents, which is basically, give or take, a gazillion dollars. It's an impossible amount of money, and everyone who was listening to Jesus tell the story knew it. To give it some context, it would take a day laborer 60 million days of work to pay it back. It's the kind of number where the math never adds up. So the king decided he would sell the servant and all his family as penalty for the debt he owed. Humbled by his crushing debt and facing the reality of his penalty, the servant fell to the ground and begged, not for forgiveness, but for time. “Be patient. Delay your anger with me. I'll pay it all.” Perhaps the servant didn't realize he needed 60 million days, but he was willing to try anything. The king responded with compassion and forgave the whole debt. Clearly the king was not worried about balancing the budget sheet. The king was not going to let the servant's past prevent the possibility of good in the future. The servant was set free.

I know how the next part of the story is supposed to go. It was supposed to be something like what my cousin and his wife did a couple of years ago. They drove from Ohio to Tennessee to celebrate paying off their massive educational debts by going onto the radio show of author, businessman, and creator of Financial Peace University Dave Ramsey. Dave invites recently debt-free folks to come on his show to tell their story. They give an account of how much debt they had, how they worked so hard to pay it off no matter how much sacrifice they had to make, and then shout at the top of their lungs, “We're debt free!” Can't you imagine the servant shocked by such extravagant, perhaps reckless, mercy and forgiveness getting up to celebrate? Can't you hear him shout, “I'm debt free!” Wouldn't you have done the same when you recognized all that you owed was no longer going to be held against you?

But that's not how it goes in the parable, and often that is not how it goes in life. The servant stood up, walked out of the king's presence, and came across his colleague who owed him money as well. It was a comparably small amount: only 100 days' worth of work. That said, the money from 100 days' worth of work would have felt like a mountain of debt to the person who owed it. The recently forgiven servant responded angrily and violently to his colleague and demanded the debt be paid. The indebted colleague fell to the ground, just as the first servant did, and begged for more time.

Just as we would expect, the one who was just forgiven so much received this begging, remembered his own forgiveness experience, and forgave the debt of his colleague. No? Oh, yeah that's right. Just as we would expect, the one who was just forgiven so much received this begging and generously gave his colleague more time to pay the debt. No? That's not how it goes in the

parable, and often that is not how it goes in life. Instead of forgiveness or patience, the forgiven servant throws his indebted colleague into debtors' prison to remain until the debt is gone.

How often is it the case that we choose to let the debt of a past wrong linger by holding it over someone else? Maybe we don't throw people in debtors' prison, but we make comments or jabs or snide remarks just to remind them they still owe us for the harm they've done to us. Or maybe we simply cut the relationship off all together and pretend as if the person no longer exists. It's so easy to do. It's so easy to think others need to pay. It's as easy as honking your horn at the person who cut you off on the road. It's just a reflex.

Jesus says that other servants witnessed these unexpected actions, and in their distress, shared what they saw with the king. This time the king demanded a new kind of accounting from the servant. He had to account not for his lack of money but for his lack of mercy. As it turns out, the consequences of lacking mercy and forgiveness are torturous all around. At the parable's end, Jesus repeats a warning to his followers that he has already made throughout Matthew's Gospel. Mercy begets mercy. Failing to extend mercy through forgiveness, results in a failure to receive the mercy first offered you. As Jesus said in the sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." And again, in the Lord's prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." And another time in chapter 6, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (14-15).

You see, forgiveness within the kingdom of God is rooted in the great mercy of God. Forgiveness is about restoring the possibility of a future for a relationship. And God's unlimited mercy and forgiveness extended to us through Jesus has opened the possibility of a relationship with God to us, even though our debt is so great. The worst things of our past no longer enslave our future. Praise the Lord! Because God's mercy and love is always the counterbalance to our wrongdoing and sin, the scale never tips away from a future marked with the possibility of new life—that is to say, the scale never tips away from forgiveness.

Being forgiven means one is no longer bound by his or her wrong doings of the past but is now open to relationship again in the future. Offering forgiveness means opening the possibility of a future anew—a future not foreclosed by old debt, old wrongdoing, old sin. It should be said that offering forgiveness is not the same as a complete forgetting. But offering forgiveness does mean the future is open to new possibilities. The king remembered the debt he forgave the servant, even as he freed him from the burden of it. Rather than forgetting, the king chose to hold the debt against him no more. The problem with failing to forgive your sister or brother is that it closes off their future for relationship with you. And the strange thing is, it binds up your future as well. Failing to free another to a future unbound by the past results in a failure to be free yourself. Keeping score or tabs on the wrongs done against you loads the weight of the debt on your own shoulders. And ultimately, this burden of anger or bitterness or blame that builds in the tallying of wrongs crushes anyone who tries to keep count.

Of course, forgiveness that frees others and ourselves to the future is no easy thing. Doing the kind of math that Jesus does, the kind of math that tips the scales away from unpayable debt towards God's mercy and forgiveness, is more challenging than multivariable calculus or any other class at Duke. The good news for us is that by the mercy of God, it is not ours to do in our own strength. Rather the Spirit of the Risen Christ living in us enables forgiveness to be a possibility at all.

Corrie ten Boom understood this. Corrie was a Dutch watchmaker who during the Holocaust hid Jews in her home to protect them from the Nazis. She and her family were caught and taken to a concentration camp. Corrie's sister died in the camp, but eventually Corrie was freed. After the war, she traveled Europe proclaiming the message of Christ's mercy and the gospel of forgiveness. She even travelled to Germany to preach there. In her writings, Corrie shares about an encounter she had at one church. She recognized a man sitting in the pews as one of the guards at the concentration camp where she was imprisoned. At the end of her speaking, the man approached her. He told her he had become a Christian, and that while he knew God had forgiven him, he wanted to ask her for forgiveness as well. The man extended his hand to her, but she was filled with anger. She writes:

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. "Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand, I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!"

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then."¹

God's mercy outweighed the harm of the offender and the hurt of the offended. And when we open our hearts, God's mercy and forgiveness will outweigh our harm and our hurt as well for the future freedom of everyone involved. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "Forgiveness is at the Core," WorkingPreacher.org, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5454> (accessed September 9, 2020).