

### **Mat 18:21-35 – “O Lord, How Many?!”**

Well, we certainly are back in the full swing of things after the Summer lull! This is the week that all the various meetings resume – our Session on Tuesday, the Central Committee of Presbytery on Wednesday, and the City in Focus Breakfast early on Friday morning. It's good to start off with an easy week! Soon however the pulse of church life will again quicken to the usual multitasking chaos. In the middle of it all it is also good to have the steady heartbeat of worship, and the opportunity to navigate our way through the scriptures.

This week we continue the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples chronicled in the Gospel according to Matthew. The essence of our reading seems pretty simple: a short question and answer between Peter and Jesus, followed by a parable. The topic is forgiveness, in particular continuing the theme of forgiving someone who is a brother or sister in the faith. It would be easy to let it all slip by with a ho-hum yawn, thinking “yeah, forgiveness, yadda, yadda, yadda.”

However, we should not be in any doubt as to how important the message of forgiveness is in this text! What we read is but one part of a long section on that very theme of forgiveness, beginning with the example of a small child being the model of who will inherit the kingdom, passing through one lost sheep being more important than the other ninety-nine, and climaxing with the parable of the unforgiving servant. And that concluding statement about what will happen to those who do not forgive is right frightening, isn't it? The threat of dire and everlasting consequences for not forgiving rings out painfully clear. It's a bit like the closing statement to a good, old-fashioned, pulpit-thumping fire and brimstone sermon, punctuating a teaching session with a dreadful threat. How did we ever move from the gentle, loving tolerance and forgiveness of a child or a lost lamb to such a harsh and blood-curdling threat?

The answer to that question is of course the use of exaggeration for emphasis. Exaggeration? Absolutely! Notwithstanding that blood-curdling threat with which it ends, this parable with the servants is not to be taken literally but is intended to convey a really important point of understanding, and thus incredibly great (even unbelievable) exaggeration is used. For example, take the amount that the first slave owed the king, namely 10,000 talents. Assuming a rough estimate that one talent was the equivalent of fifteen years wages, and taking an average wage of \$30,000 per year, in today's terms this works out to about half a trillion dollars! That fortunate slave, being forgiven so much, surely must have heaved a sigh of relief!!

By comparison, the loan owed to the first slave by the second works out to about \$10,000 in today's terms – a not insignificant amount, but one that is possible to repay, although most of us can sympathize with the second slave's plea for some time to cough up the money. And so too we feel the expected anger towards the first slave who, having just been let off the hook for an amount almost a million times greater (well, only half a million times greater if you've done the math, but half a million doesn't read so well, so I've rounded up!), refuses to budge and throws the other into debtor's prison. I think most of us utter at least a quiet “yesss!” when the unkind and unforgiving slave is ratted on by the other slaves, and receives due justice from the king, being thrown himself into debtor's prison and even tortured until he can pay off the full half-trillion dollars.

Talk about exaggeration! Think for a moment about the concept of debtor's prison – you're in jail, you're busy being tortured and thus neither available for nor in any shape to work, so you have no income whatsoever. At the average salary we used above of \$30,000 per year, it would take just under 50 million working days (6 per week) to gross the half-trillion – and that's approximately 150,000 years, give or take a millennia or two! The actual time required to repay

the loan is half-a-million days divided by daily income, but since there's no income at all while being tortured in the king's debtor's prison, then the time is half-a-million divided by zero, which as Philip would confirm is an infinitely large number (as if 150,000 years isn't!). So, from our analysis, it's abundantly clear that:

1. the first slave owes an impossible amount, and is forgiven the entire amount
2. the same slave is owed relatively little, but does not forgive even a penny
3. that ungrateful wretch suffers forever as a consequence

and we can readily reach the intended conclusion that it is infinitely better to forgive than not to forgive. I think we get the point – never mind how many times, it is the forgiving that is important here!

And while we can nod in agreement that forgiving is important, we also can agree, I think, that it is really, really hard to do. As we slip back from the unreal world of the parable into the real world in which we live we rediscover a world often full of injustice: of people who demand much and give little; of people who seem to abuse forgiveness, who soak forgiveness up like a battery recharge on the way to the next “sinning against”, and we ask, like Peter, how many times do we forgive the sister or brother in faith who sins against us. Peter apparently heard the unusual message that the ‘final’ step in dealing with such a person was to treat them with tolerance and acceptance, which implied forgiving them. However, it is simply not possible to tolerate someone, let alone accept them, if there is some smoldering resentment burning under the surface, because the heat of that resentment almost always erupts in a fiery display of hatred and vengeance. Peter heard, and obviously understood, that continuing, ongoing forgiveness was being called for, and he realized how difficult that could and would be. “How many times?” he asks.

Now to be truly precise, he actually asks “how often?”, which is a different question, dealing with the rate or frequency of forgiving, and he gets an answer couched instead in terms of amounts, but the point works out to be the same. Indeed, Peter himself switched the topic from “how often” to “how many” by suggesting a number. It's possible to hear Peter asking this question the way we might, a bit tongue-in-cheek – not just “how many times?” but “O Lord, how many times?!”. Even perhaps with a bit of sarcasm, using a number that was more than double the current rabbinical standard of three times, asking, “(as many as) seven times?”. However I would prefer to think of Peter, having caught the message that tolerance and acceptance implied forgiveness, was genuinely attempting to stretch the limit to a much more acceptable number.

Most of us are familiar with Jesus' reply, although due to a bad translation many centuries ago many people know it as “seventy times seven” instead of the “seventy-seven” that was actually written. Whichever, given how hard it is to forgive, sometimes seven times seems as difficult or even impossible as does seventy-seven or seventy times seven (just shy of 500!). Never mind how many – most of us feel that any number greater than one is unbearable – you know the “fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me” kind of feeling that to forgive more than once means we are somehow being conned, used or even abused. Some politicians want to try to make sure this doesn't happen by echoing here the “three strikes and you're out” kind of treatment we see in other nations. Going beyond three, even to seven times, seems more than anyone should be asked, and so seven seems divinely good, and anything above that utterly impossible.

So, how can we reconcile that feeling with Jesus' command to forgive such an impossible number of times? Well, as in many a math problem, the trick is to invert the problem, to turn it

upside-down, which often suggests a solution. Here, instead of considering someone else who needs forgiveness, consider yourself, kind of a “forgiveness begins at home” approach. How often do you need to be forgiven? Any of us who can be truly honest with ourselves know and accept that our need to be forgiven is truly great, we need to be forgiven a very large number of times.

With such a need, how much forgiveness is available? Without faith, not much. You are limited to how much you can forgive yourself, and how much forgiveness you can receive from others. But faith in God, understanding His grace and mercy offered through the death and resurrection of Christ, gives us a new perspective on the amount of forgiveness offered freely by God. Since we know God’s power to be without limit, we can safely infer that there is no limit to His grace. As St. Paul says, reconciliation and forgiveness is “freely offered by God in Christ”.

Now, here’s the tough part – apply this to yourself: you are forgiven by God, with scads and gobs left over. Take just a bit of that surplus, and forgive yourself. Go ahead, that’s part of what “accepting Christ” means – it is largely about understanding the unlimited forgiveness from God available to you in Christ, and scooping up some of that forgiveness flowing over you, and putting it to good purpose, beginning with forgiving yourself. Not merely a superficial reassuring “I’m OK, I’m OK” kind of self-transactional analysis, but finally finding the power, strength and truth from Christ to confront those parts of you that you would rather forget, and coming to terms with them forever. That is the beginning also of the true freedom that is available in Christ, release from the chains of self that bind us all.

The hope and the promise is that freed from the weaknesses of self, from all those things within you that generate fear and anger, and filled with an over-abundance of forgiveness you will be able to spill that forgiveness upon others with something approaching the quantities of which Jesus spoke. You cannot really respond to his command to forgive others without limit unless and until you have been able to accept his forgiveness of you and for you. Once you have accepted God’s forgiveness offered in Christ, and have begun to forgive yourself, you can indeed begin to savour the true freedom of forgiving others their sins against you.

The essence of this reading is indeed clear – never mind how many times, you are forgiven by God in Christ, forgiven with a love and grace that knows no bounds, forgiven beyond your wildest dreams. The implication of being so forgiven is also as simple and as clear: forgive others, as he has forgiven you.