



“New Math”

Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35

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September 14, 2008

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

For once Peter understood perfectly. This time Jesus’ teaching touched a deep place in his life and challenged some basic assumptions.

It all began when Jesus overheard Peter and the others arguing about who would be the most important, have the highest status, be the main man in the new community God was establishing on earth. Peter, of all of them, had cause to claim the highest rank.

Jesus interrupted the squabble with a long discourse (Matthew 18) about life in this new community formed by God. Jesus got their attention right off the bat. He let a child into the middle of the bickering disciples and declared that life in God’s new world begins with humility. And if they didn’t become like a child – naturally humble and dependent on others – they would never understand him or God. And, by the way, Jesus added, the new community treats children with special respect and tender care.

After that rather disorienting introduction, Jesus went on to declare that members of the new people of God must do more than merely get along. We must be reconciled to each other. Reconciliation is so important, it is the work of the entire church. Jesus laid out a communitywide process to ensure that broken relationships get healed. Holding grudges, keeping score and other very human behavior is not appropriate in the new community God is forming.

Peter got it – and it bothered him as it should bother us. “Okay, I understand,” Peter said. “Forgiveness is basic and you are calling us to forgive each other. But, what if someone in the community keeps on offending me. How many times do I have to forgive him or her? Doesn’t that cheapen forgiveness and encourage irresponsible behavior? Shouldn’t there be a limit to our tolerance? How often must I forgive so and so? Is seven a good number?”

It’s a reasonable question, don’t you think? Human nature suggests that rewarding bad behavior is counterproductive. It seems a matter of justice not to let the perpetrators of crimes and mischief off easily. What if we began forgiving everyone for everything? While some good would surely follow, so would an increase in crime, violence, and other bad behaviors if no bad consequences resulted from bad behavior. You cannot reward irresponsibility. Justice demands retribution.

Besides, forgiveness and reconciliation are a very personal matter. All of us carry wounds inflicted by the behavior of others. And, it seems, the closer the perpetrator is to us, the deeper the wound. Family grievances are deeper than most hurts. And it’s harder to forgive people closest to us. I’m still working on things that happened to me as a son and brother. I’ve resolved most of those hurts, but they still rise up unbidden and haunt me.

I know two brothers who were deeply wounded by and alienated from their father. One of them decided to make things right, took the initiative, and reconciled with his father. The other brother can't seem to get over the past. His bitterness eats at his soul years later. The first brother has told him repeatedly that life is too short to nurse old grudges, but it does no good.

Who of us doesn't carry baggage from our work lives? Years ago the church I led embarked on an expensive building project. One of the leaders in the church and community vehemently opposed the project. He told me not to ask him for a penny.

The situation was more difficult than usual since that man had been a trusted advisor and, in many ways, a mentor to me. The project succeeded and I more or less forgot about the conflict. In fact, the man later told me he was wrong and made a generous donation.

Then a few weeks ago, I was looking through my diary and came across the weeks and months of that project. A sentence leaped up from the page. I had completely forgotten – or more likely repressed it. That leader also told me that my leading the project was a huge mistake that would likely ruin my career.

The sting of that statement became fresh again. It still hurts. Someone recently asked me about that man, and a whole rush of unhealthy emotions rose up in me.

Part of human nature is the inability to get over some things. In fact it appears we often don't want to. Frederick Buechner puts it wonderfully:

To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll your tongue over the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel of both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back – in many ways it is a feast for a king.

Several years ago, just before Valentine's Day, I saw an ad for a new website, "revenge.com." The website offered wonderful prank gifts and other ideas intended to wound someone who'd hurt you. The desire for payback is part of the human condition. We don't want to forget or forgive some things or some people.

Besides, Christians add, isn't the logic of the gospel that repentance precedes God's forgiveness? If so, can't we hold grudges against those who hurt us until they repent – or as it is so mildly put these days – apologize?

Jesus' answer to Peter's suggestion of seven times is profoundly disorienting. "No Peter. Not seven times but seventy times seven." In other words, Jesus suggested to Peter – and to us – that calculating offenses or keeping score misses the point entirely. In fact, grudge-keeping – feeding the cycle of anger and revenge – is counterproductive in life and inappropriate in God's new community. Jesus deliberately upends our moral instincts.

In Luke's account of this story, when Jesus finished answering Peter, the rest of the disciples said, "Lord, increase our faith!" Something is going on here far beyond ordinary moral reasoning and the way of the world. Apparently, we need a larger moral frame of reference.

The astonishing story of Joseph and his brothers in the latter part of Genesis powerfully illustrates Jesus' point. Joseph was the youngest of twelve brothers. He was also his father's favorite child and an arrogant boy who came to be hated by his brothers.

They hatched a plot to kill Joseph but at the last minute decided to sell him to a slave trader headed to Egypt. They told their father Joseph was killed by wild animals, a lie which broke the old man's heart.

Joseph had twenty years to nurse his hurt – or to hate those cruel brothers – in his years of slavery in Egypt. Along the way, Joseph’s gifts of wisdom and his flair for management lifted him out of slavery into high government office. But he never forgot.

Famine struck and people from all over came to Egypt for food, saved and distributed by Joseph. His brothers showed up in the food line. They did not recognize him. Now was his chance. He cleverly, and a bit cruelly, tormented them without revealing his identity.

Finally, when the time came to reveal himself, a strange thing happened. He had those criminal brothers right where he wanted. Surely, now, justice – if not sheer revenge – would give them their just deserts.

The brothers were shocked and terrified when Joseph finally said, “I am Joseph, your brother.” But instead of getting back, Joseph began weeping and for no reason, save mercy, forgave them all for everything. Justice demanded retribution; mercy offered forgiveness.

Like all stories in the Bible, it’s a story about God. And while God builds retributive justice into the structure of the moral universe, God also creates an alternative moral universe.

God is determined to bring all his children home and sets out to do just that. With no reason save mercy, God offers utterly undeserved forgiveness to all. The only catch is we have to receive it.

Jesus’ point with Peter – and us – is that in God’s alternative moral universe there is no scorekeeping. A new math declares that numbers and scorekeeping add up to zero and are, in fact, irrelevant.

Besides, a careful reading of the world the way it is suggests the old way doesn’t really work. Retributive justice may be fair but it seldom heals broken people or broken relationships. After Buechner’s wonderful sentence about the delicious king’s feast of angry revenge, he adds, “The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

Miroslav Volf puts it more profoundly. As a young theologian Volf lived in Marshall Tito’s communist Yugoslavia. He was a theologian trained in the west, married to an American, and the son of a Christian pastor. He was declared an enemy of the state and spent a year being interrogated, threatened and harassed. Fear for himself and his family nearly choked him.

Volf, now a professor at Yale Divinity School, notes that the experience of an interrogator’s terror causes you either to love your interrogator forever or hate him forever. He writes:

I felt no love, only vengeance. But if I gave in to the vengeance I would not be responding as a free human being but as a wounded animal. To act as a human being is to feel such, but also to follow moral requirements stitched into the fabric of humanity....I determined not to lose what I believed is the best in the human spirit – love of neighbors, even enemies.

Volf has written one of the best books on forgiveness – God’s and ours – in our time.

God’s new math runs far deeper than the best in the human spirit. Jesus told Peter a parable about a king who had an assistant who owed him about a billion dollars. He called the man to account, and the man told the truth: “I can’t pay you back – ever.” The king determined he would sell the man and his family into slavery. The man begged for his life and for no good reason – save mercy – the king forgave the man.

Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims
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The forgiven man proceeded to call one of his own debtors to account. The man owed him fifty dollars. He couldn't pay, and the forgiven man sold him into slavery.

Jesus' point is, of course, that to be forgiven – an act of sheer mercy - requires the forgiven to be forgiving, and the forgiven community to be a community of reconciliation. You must forgive, Jesus ends, "from the heart." This new community lives out of new disposition.

God's forgiveness is simply given, not deserved. It is larger than any human accounting and, besides, God's not counting. Anyone who realizes the power of that forgiveness will become forgiving.

Like it or not we all need forgiving. Ernest Hemmingway tells the story of a man in Spain whose son, Paco, ran away to Madrid, disappeared and remained estranged from his father for years. The father, longing for his son, put an ad in the Madrid newspaper that read, "Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon on Friday. All is forgiven, love, Papa." Paco is such a common name in Spain that when the father arrived at the Hotel Montana at noon there were 800 Pacos waiting for their fathers.

We need forgiving by God and by each other. We need to forgive as much as we need forgiving. If we cannot forgive others who may not deserve it, we do not know what it means to be forgiven. Volf writes that the new community of God's forgiven people, "live in a dance of love in the embrace of the triune God with love freely given, freely received and never exhausted." Forgiveness, a forgiveness that makes no human sense, lies deep in the character of God. When received and understood, God's forgiveness transforms ordinary human beings into men, women, and children who forgive each other for no good reason than that God forgives.

And, thanks be to God, the forgiven form a community with an instinct, a passion and a way of life that embodies God's sheer mercy – undeserved forgiveness.

Amen.

David C. Fisher, 2008