

## Matthew 18:21-35: The Jesus Math

September 14, 2014

As I was nearing the end of my secondary school education I was given an opportunity to spend the summer in a program at Appalachian to learn about the New Math. I was a rising high school junior and the idea of spending time on a college campus for several weeks during the summer was appealing. Since it was a scholarship based offer and did not require my folks who were employees of Cannon Mills to supply any funds, I accepted and had a very good time. I learned about Venn diagrams, sets and subsets—elements of the New Math which was actually more of a different way of teaching mathematical theory than it was any new type of math. When I look at this passage from Matthew however, I can't help but conclude that Jesus was indeed proposing a new type of math—a fundamentally different way of calculation for how one interacted with others. Refreshing our memories the preceding verses have been about going to someone with whom you have had a problem—someone who has harmed you. While the later portion of the passage on the surface seemed to outline a procedure which would lead to the person being excluded from the community, in reality Jesus' call was for them to be brought back into relationship—like he included marginalized groups within his care and concern. It seems that Peter understood that, but he still had some question about this idea of forgiving someone who had wronged him. Our first verse this morning tells us, "Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" There is an old translation of scripture which is called Young's literal translation. It sticks very close to the literal meanings of the words and phrasing found in the original language. **Matthew 18:21** according to that translation reads, "Then Peter having come near to him, said, 'Sir, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him -- till seven times?' This is useful, because there really was no church as we think of it at the time this question was posed. Even the synagogues of the devote Jews were not the places of worship which we now view them. Devote Jews went there and read Scripture, but the Temple was still the focus of worship during Jesus' lifetime. Peter's question is really asking how often is he to forgive someone he knows who has harmed him. But within Peter's question he has gone on to provide a suggested answer—as many as seven times. If Peter had not been growing in his understanding of Jesus' view of the world his suggestion would likely have been very different. The accepted rabbinic approach to this problem would have been different from the number Peter suggests as sufficient. Using the rabbinic approach he might have suggested that he forgive as many as two or three times. The traditional approach would have been to forgive, yes, but prudently. To forgive once was thought generous. To be let down by the same person and forgive a second time would have been seen as exemplary in that culture. But to be fool enough to get hurt by the same individual a third time and to forgive even then would have been bordering on the unimaginable. In some ways, that approach also expresses the reality of our views despite our knowing of Jesus' answer. Like us, Peter knows that Jesus' view is different than those of the rabbis. So he makes what he considers a bold move— His proposal is to "Forgive as many as seven times" This would be absurd by rabbinic standards, but perhaps Jesus would approve—like in the Sermon on the Mount—Peter thought he was going the second mile, giving his cloak as well as his coat. Peter

thinks he will surely win approval for this impressive demonstration of what he has learned from Jesus. Perhaps he will even have another moment when Jesus praises him as he did when he proclaimed Jesus the Messiah. However Jesus response is not accepting of this offer of Peter's. Instead, Jesus says not seven times but seventy-seven times. Some translations make this seven time seventy or four hundred ninety times. The Greek can be read either way, but in reality the number Jesus proposes isn't meant to be a scorekeeping for forgiveness. What Jesus is doing is giving Peter a number, but one which is such an exaggeration that it would be impossible to do. Jesus' response is meant to move forgiveness out of the realm of calculation. What Jesus is telling Peter is that if he is keeping track, he isn't really offering forgiveness at all. It may seem that you are being generous, but if you are keeping track—no matter the number of times you have in mind to show forgiveness—you have set a limit on your forgiveness. You are in essence waiting for your friend, neighbor or relation to cross some sort of line or boundary you have set. It may be a very generously drawn line or boundary, but it is nevertheless a drawn line. Beyond that line you are no longer willing to forgive. Jesus is telling Peter and us, that if we keep count, it is not called forgiveness. The question Peter is asking seems to be what to do if the offender does listen when we approach and there is reconciliation but at a later time the same person does the same thing again. How often should one reconcile in this situation? This becomes a very difficult situation in our broken world. At first glance it provides justification for our brokenness. Unlimited forgiveness might be seen to imply that someone in an abusive relationship should continue forgiving the abuser. That is not what is being said. What is desirable is for the one who has been abused to forgive the one who has violated them, but not allow the abuse to continue. The old saying of forgive the sinner, but not the sin is the point here. Forgiveness is offered, but for the relationship to continue, the abuse—the sin—must stop. This point is illustrated in the parable which follows Jesus' answer. Forgiveness given should have a positive effect on relationships. Even if the relationship cannot continue, then forgiveness is offered which brings healing to the one who forgives. The one who forgives is not left with fear, anger, resentment, hatred. What forgiveness is meant to do is break the cycle of damaging feelings so that relationships can flourish. But this call to forgive so generously seems to go against our very natures, so when this passage comes along in the lectionary how do we understand it as not just good advice which we probably can't really achieve in our lives. We find the call to forgive others not only in this passage, but every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. We are told not only to forgive those near to us, but also our enemies. So many calls to do this throughout Scripture and according to the parable Jesus tells after he answers Peter's question, it is a major point in our relationship not only with each other, but with God. In the parable, the king forgives a major debt owed to him by the slave when the slave pleads his cause to the king. The ten thousand talents would have been an almost unimaginable sum. One talent would have represented the equivalent of 15-20 years of daily labor. Yet the debt is not just reduced, but forgiven. When behavior of the slave whose debt was forgiven could not then show mercy and forgive the debt of a fellow slave who owed him so much less was reported to the king, the reaction of the king was not a repeat of the forgiveness, but a calling to account for the lack of forgiveness passed on. The king had forgiven the debt owed to him, but the infraction against another person was not forgiven. The king forgave the debt expecting that the one forgiven would then likewise be forgiving. The debt owed to the slave was only 100 denarii, or the amount earned with 100

days of labor. It could have been repaid. The king had forgiven about 600,000 times that much. Because of the frequency forgiveness is mentioned and the math which Jesus applies to the matter which makes it not so much an occurrence but a way of life we need to understand forgiveness itself. So when we are called to be forgiving, Biblically speaking what is this thing we are called to do? Forgiveness in this context is the restoration of the proper relationship, the reconciliation between members of the group. What do we understand forgiveness to entail? The dictionary tells us that forgiveness is to give up resentment against or the desire to punish; to stop being angry with. Some aspects of this process have been expressed by various notable figures. Martin Luther King Jr. stated that forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a constant attitude. I think this implies that forgiveness requires constant awareness and commitment to that goal. It must become an embodied way of life which strengthens our relationship not only with the “other” but with God. C.S. Lewis stated that to be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you. That is certainly something that we deeply feel because we are aware of our shortcomings in living out our discipleship. But because we are human, knowing we are blessed by God’s forgiveness doesn’t always help us to be forgiving toward others. J. K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter novels has one of her characters, Dumbledore state that people find it far easier to forgive others for being wrong than being right. I find that to be a very true statement about human behavior. We often feel we can pat ourselves on the back for acting generously when we have been wronged, but when we have been wrong and it is pointed out—that seems harder to let go of so that we can resume relationships. Another instance where forgiveness seems to be hard to achieve is in the matter of self-forgiveness. And these observations lead us to the crux of the matter—if we harbor resentments, if we hold onto feelings of being wronged—how can we be in community together? How do we live out the commandments to love God, others and ourselves? That is why we need to be so forgiving that we embrace the Jesus Math which says we stop keeping score or using math at all. And the way that we do this—even as broken as we are—is that we know that God loves us to a degree we cannot fully understand. We are a forgiven people and as such we are empowered in that relationship to be a forgiving people. That is the good news from today’s Gospel reading.