Matthew 18: 21-35 Keeping Score

Keeping Score—have you ever noticed how much we enjoy that endeavor? You might first think about how we do it in the sports world—football, baseball, soccer, all those competitive activities where the score is used to declare a winner. And being the winner is very important. Continuing with the sports theme—there is also the keeping of scores outside the individual games…scores or rankings as to who has the most hits, home runs in baseball. Or which pitcher gets the most strike outs. In football, which quarterback has the best completion rate, scores the most touchdowns…..it goes on and on within athletic competitions…something in each sport and each position within the sport gets a number by which ranking can occur. But that tendency is much more pervasive around us than in the sports world. It extends into how we view almost all of our activities…among companies…in the work place…wherever we go and whatever we do we tend to want to put a number on it and then compare our score to others. When Peter comes to Jesus in the text before us this morning, he has numbers on his mind. A literal translation of the Greek reads this way: “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him—until (as far as) seven times. He is responding to Jesus’ message about reconciliation among brothers and sisters—those who were in relationship with each other. In last week’s passage, a wrong had been done and the wronged individual was told to go to the one who wronged them so that the relationship might be restored. What Jesus had just taught stressed the importance of maintaining relationships…making the restoring of a member after a disagreement more important that the procedure for discipline. This mending of a breach is mediated through forgiveness which explains why the topic is on Peter’s mind. Peter is visualizing himself in the role of the wronged one—so he asks Jesus about the granting of forgiveness. Notice, Peter does not just ask the question—he proposes an answer. When Peter begins this conversation about forgiveness, he asks Jesus for a number. He wants to know just how much will be expected of him, how often is it reasonable to forgive, how much is required of him as a disciple of Jesus. The Jewish tradition as described in Mosaic and Pharisaic Law was very legalistic and precise in setting limits and requirements for almost everything. It appears that Peter is beginning to understand—or at least thinks he understands something about how Jesus would approach this issue of how many times. He is realizing that Jesus as Messiah doesn’t think or act as other people do, so the answer he offers is something more generous than the usual expectation. He doesn’t say shall I forgive as many as two or three times? That would have been the expected response under current law—to forgive, yes, but prudently. To forgive once is generous. To be let down by the same person and forgive a second time would be exemplary. To be fool enough to get hurt by the same individual a third time and to forgive them even then—unheard of. Does that sentiment sound familiar? How difficult do we find it to grant second and third chances to others? But Peter, understanding that Jesus thinks big, makes a bold move—he offers the suggestion--forgive as many as seven time? By rabbinic standards this would be absurd, but Peter thinks it just might be the number of times that Jesus would approve. Seven is a holy number and represents such an exaggerated amount over the expected that surely Jesus would approve of this offer. We picture Peter being confident that this is an impressive demonstration of all that Peter has learned from his teacher. But Jesus, as he often does, poses a radical suggestion: Peter, you aren’t even close. Not seven but 77 times we are to forgive. You are moving in the right direction, but you still have a long way to go. That’s an absurd number, isn’t it. At least 77 is the number most translations use, but the Greek more literally says seven times seventy. That would make the number 490 times. Peter, you are moving in the right direction, but you have a long way to go. Four hundred ninety is the number, if you have to have one. But that is an impossible number—completely unthinkable. What Jesus is suggesting is not that we need a larger spreadsheet to keep track of the offenses and how often we forgive. Jesus is not merely requiring an additional number of gracious acts. Instead he is suggesting there is no need for a spreadsheet at all. We are not to keep track because if you are keeping track, it is not really forgiveness at all. Forgiveness is a deep reservoir of grace that ought not to run dry. What Jesus means is this: forgive your brothers and sisters beyond your ability to keep track. Keeping track just means you are waiting for your neighbor to cross some line—a generously drawn line—but a line nevertheless. There is a point beyond which you are no longer willing to forgive. Jesus calls into question the entire game. If you keep score, it is not called forgiveness. After answering Peter’s suggestion with his own, Jesus then tells a parable—a parable again about the ways of the kingdom of heaven. In this parable there is a king who wishes to settle accounts with his slaves. The parable does not tell us why the debts are being called in or what the cause of the indebtedness was, only that a reckoning was being demanded. When he begin asking for repayment, the first slave owes 10,000 talents. A talent is a weight measurement which often was used as a monetary exchange in gold or silver—a silver talent would have been worth about 15 years of labor for the typical worker. That calculates out to about 150,000 years worth of income---an exorbitant amount to owe. So no wonder the slave could not pay. The king orders him, his wife, his children and all his possessions sold in order for the payment to be made. When the slave begs for mercy, promising to pay if he is shown mercy—the king releases him and forgave him the debt. The king shows extravagant grace in his forgiveness of the debt owed. But that isn’t the end of the parable Jesus tells. It seems that the forgiven slave had someone who owed him a debt—a debt of 100 denarii. Denarii are also a silver coin, but a small one—in fact, it was about what a typical worker would receive for a day’s work. The forgiven slave demands that the debt he is owed be paid, and receives the same plea for mercy that he has just uttered. Literally the same words. “Have patience with me and I will pay you.” He has been forgiven a debt 100 times as large, but refused to forgive and casts his debtor into prison. His behavior is reported back to the king who summons him and says: “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” The king rescinds the forgiveness previously granted. Forgiveness in this parable is both an extravagant and a precious thing. In this passage we are shown that forgiveness is not only relational it is reciprocal and reliant. Again, the parable contains exaggerated numbers—unrealistic amounts are used. But the context for the extravagant forgiveness is set by the last line of our passage: “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” When the disciples requested of Jesus that he teach them how to pray forgiveness was a key component of the prayer. Forgiveness lies at the heart of our faith in God and our love for one another. Forgiveness which we receive from God our King in the person of Jesus is what our King expects from his subjects in their dealings with each other. Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. In the prayer the emphasis is on what we will receive in turn for the forgiveness we have offered. Forgive your brother or sister from your heart; the parable turns the tables, teaching us that we have first been forgiven and encouraging us to forgive in turn. When we consider how much forgiveness we have received and continue to receive—what we are asked to do in return seems true to the scale of the parable. We are called to forgive without calculation or reservation. That, of course, is not easy to do. But simply because we know we will be forgiven we do not want to grieve our Lord. We love and offer forgiveness even when we feel unable because the forgiving king loves through us. God’s forgiveness surpasses both our deserving and our comprehension of it; we who have first been forgiven must, therefore and thereupon, forgive those who have wronged us so much less. We can’t keep score. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.