

Text: Matthew 18: 21-35
Title: Arithmetic of the Kingdom
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Roger Allen Nelson

How many times should you forgive?
What would you do to forgive or be forgiven?
How far would you go to forgive someone?

Consider the story of Alvin Straight.

At 73 years old, Alvin, a retired Iowa farmer with cataracts, bad hips, two canes, a propensity for bad cigars and fourteen children – seven of whom survived – learned that his brother, Lyle, suffered a stroke on his farm in Mount Zion, Wisconsin. And, although they were once as close as brothers could be, they hadn't spoken for more than a decade. They were estranged from one another with a chasm as wide as the Iowa sky between them.

So, afraid that life was reaching low ebb, with emphysema setting up shop in his lungs, Alvin acknowledged that the time to settle up accounts was running short. He said, "I want to sit with him and look up at the stars like we used to, long ago." And, with that spirit, this crusty-old-codger climbed aboard the only thing he could still drive, his riding lawn mower, and he set out for Wisconsin.

The first lawnmower barely got him out of town before it broke down. So, Alvin had it towed home, shot it, as if it were a horse, and then with his Social Security check bought a 1966 John Deere riding lawn mower. Towing a covered trailer full of wieners and camping gear, he again turned his face to the east and headed for Wisconsin.

Puttering along the berm at a stately six miles an hour he traveled some 300 miles across the top of Iowa. It was a slow journey. One doesn't drive a lawnmower to Wisconsin quickly. Alvin was on the road for five weeks – a geriatric knight on a quest with his trusty motorized steed as his only companion. He ventured forth to forgive and be forgiven....

Hollywood captured this story in the movie, "The Straight Story."
They couldn't make up something so absurdly full of life and grace.

How many times should you forgive?
What would you do to forgive or be forgiven?
How far would you go to forgive someone?

In our text bumbling-irrepressible Peter asks Jesus the same: How far should I go? How many times should I forgive someone who sins against me?

What's often lost in the popular reading of this text is its context. Immediately preceding this exchange Jesus tells the parable of the shepherd leaving the ninety-nine to search for the one last lost sheep and then he offers a practical four-step process to settle disputes among his called-out-followers that ends with the offender being treated as if he or she were a "pagan or a tax collector." The same ones with whom Jesus shared meals and kept company.

Then, the very next thing Peter asks is, "So how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me?"

The text doesn't give any indication if this was all part of the same conversation or if Matthew is simply stacking up the teachings of Jesus regarding our common life. But again, even as God pursues us, Jesus offers a way of being
that's rooted in a different allegiance,
that turns things on their heads,
that seems outlandish, irrational, inconceivable.

If the preceding text is Jesus at his practical best this is Jesus at his impractical worst.

Because, Peter – proud as can be – asks about forgiveness and suggests the fullness of seven times. He thinks he's scoring points with Jesus. Only to be trumped by the absurdity of seventy-seven or seventy times seven.

Jesus responds with a figure of speech that suggests something beyond what we can count, and in doing so references the memory of Lamech. In Genesis 4, Lamech (a descendent of the murderer, Cain) boasts to his wives of his code of revenge. In his words:

*I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me.
If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy times seven.*

Lamech offers the arithmetic of the world: An eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth, a pound of flesh for an ounce of offense. Lamech would go to untold ends to settle the score. If wronged he would get even. His would be the last word. But, Jesus turns the tables on Peter,
on Lamech,
on all of us....

Rather than balance the books unlimited times, Jesus commands his followers to forgive unlimited times. Rather than grab for revenge, Jesus commands his disciples to offer forgiveness. The followers of Jesus are to be so generous of spirit as to forgive beyond their ability to count. Jesus offers the arithmetic of the kingdom.

But, that has to be hyperbole, doesn't it? Jesus can't mean forgiveness for the really hard and hurtful stuff in life. He must be talking about the petty offenses that happen among believers: rudeness, gossip, a mean word, a cold shoulder. He doesn't give us a process or guidelines for how to be reconciled.

Surely, he's not talking about forgiveness for dictators or terrorists.
Surely, he's not suggesting forgiveness of the abuser.
Surely, he's talking about forgiveness for those already forgiven.

Right?

Imagine the cloud that crossed Peter's face. He thought he was going to impress Jesus; only to be staggered by the jaw dropping absurdity of forgiveness beyond measure.

So, Jesus, seeing the trouble in Peter's face, launches into a colorful cartoon where the circumstances and scales are overblown....

The king was keeping books and the servant owed something like a bazillion dollars. The servant offers to pay it back on time. Think: a dollar a day on the national debt. He might as well drive a lawn mower from Iowa to the southern tip of Argentina.

Except, the king looks with mercy on the man and forgives his debt. Scott free. Every last penny. Wiped clean. Good to go. No interest, not points, no penalties, no threats, no recrimination, no keeping track. Free!
Thanks be to God.

Dear friends, we have all been wronged.

And, any tension or expectation in a sermon about forgiveness is lost because we know the ending – we're supposed to forgive. But, we also know that there are hurts too deep, evil too profound, and the demands for revenge or justice are limitless. So, the words of Jesus seem like pious platitudes that don't take in to account the real world.

But, Tom Long writes that the parable is about proportion. In his words:

When one gets a sense of proportion, a sense of the size of our sinful debt and the immensity of God's mercy, then no one would dare attempt to ration forgiveness. We know too well that the little boat in which we are sailing is floating on a deep sea of grace and that forgiveness is not dispensed with an eyedropper but a fire hose.

It is a wonderful image. The mercy of God is beyond our measure; who then are we to squeeze out forgiveness only when our standards are met, and our needs are satisfied, and our books are balanced?

I've lost track of how many weddings I've done. Sometimes I'll see a young couple and I can't remember if I did their wedding or not. But, in my mushy memory there are moments of great humor and beauty that stand out. One of those moments was a wedding in Holland, Michigan in which the bride's cousin read a portion of I Corinthians 13. Typical wedding fare, except the cousin was a young Korean boy with Down's Syndrome. He was nervous. His speech was halting. The words were hard to understand. He couldn't have been any cuter. His heart was wide open. And, he read:

Love keeps no record of wrongs.

There wasn't a dry eye in the room.

Dear friends, what if forgiveness isn't really about number or distance?
What if forgiveness isn't about arithmetic? To count, to keep track, isn't really forgiveness.

Forgiveness isn't waiting for a final ledger.
Forgiveness isn't holding the IOU waiting to balance the books.
Forgiveness isn't burying the hatchet, but putting a marker on the site.
Forgiveness is limitless, because it doesn't keep track.

Love keeps no record of wrongs.

If we're loved and forgiven by God, with our sins erased on a cross, isn't it possible that others are too? And as God's love in Christ keeps no record of our wrongs, isn't it possible that we would see others with a similar generosity?

Debt is really about power.

If I hold you in debt; I hold power over you. And forgiveness, therefore, is about giving up power, letting go of the upper hand. In forgiving we make ourselves vulnerable, we give up self for the sake of the other, for the sake of the relationship, for the sake of love.

Alvin Straight was finally moved by love.

There was no rehashing of wrongs.
There was no tit for tat.
There was no scramble for the last winning word.
There was the simple recognition that finally forgiveness is wider than the Iowa sky. And at the end of the journey two brothers sat on the porch and looked up at the stars, and you would want to make the night last forever.

So, this morning we're reminded that the grace and love of God forgives sin beyond measure. And, as that is true...

Maybe there's a lawnmower we can start up.
Maybe there's a sister or a brother we can forgive.
Maybe there's a debt we can release.
Maybe there's a baby we can baptize.

Amen.