

Sermon on Matthew 18: 21-35

Holy Excess

You all know this story, you've heard it many times before. The parable of the unmerciful servant.

A servant who owes his master an incalculable amount and can't repay it, pleads for mercy and his master gives it to him, forgiving the debt.

Then, when a vastly lesser amount is owed to *him*, and similarly *his* servant pleads for mercy, he refuses to give it and has his own servant thrown in prison until he can pay it back.

The first servant's master finds out about this ingratitude and promptly throws the unforgiving servant himself into prison.

'This is how my Heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive a brother or sister from your heart.', Jesus says to finish the lesson.

Ben Myers a lecturer at UTC once suggested that a parable was kind of like a joke, no matter how well you explained it, you still feel like you've missed the point.

What's more, as we all know, if you have to explain a joke, it's no longer really that funny.

Similarly, if you have to explain a parable too much, it tends to lose its punchiness, its edge.

While in so many of the parables the meaning is elusive and hidden, you have to dig around for it like a dog looking for its bone, my hunch is that this parable is more straightforwardly understandable than most.

It comes hot on the heels of Peter's question to Jesus about how much one should forgive, and Jesus tells this story to make his point.

In another place in the NT he summarises it like this... love one another as I have loved you.

In this case it is set within the realm of forgiveness... forgive one another, as God has forgiven you.

That's the punch line alright.

Your forgiving of each other must be endless, the infinite mercy of God (for you as much as anyone) compels it so.

Your being asked to forgive one another, is but a drop in the ocean compared to the width, depth, and height of the love of God, so forgive from your heart.

When we read this parable we can't help but be struck by its numbers.

It has numbers everywhere, a sure sign the Gospel writer is trying to get a point across.

Very rarely in the bible are numbers simply numbers, their usually pointing to some deeper truth or insight.

Let's read it by the numbers shall we?

Peter could have just asked 'how often should I forgive Lord?', and I'm sure that would have been enough to receive a satisfactory answer.

But he wants the number, the checklist, the balance sheet.

He wants an audit on this forgiving business.

'Up to seven times?', he continues.

Can I tick them off one by one and then when I reach the eighth time all bets are off?

Jesus himself answers with a number, 'I tell you not seven times, but seventy times seven.', which of course is code for saying, 'if you think it can be counted, like beads on an abacus, you're missing the point.'

Jesus answers with a number in order to say, it's not about the numbers.

How could it be?

Relationships are not mechanical things which can work by keeping score and writing formulas.

If you find yourself counting in the first place you've missed the point of what relationship is all about.

'If you kept a record of sins, O Lord,', wrote the psalmist, 'who could stand?'

Forgiveness, Jesus wants to say, has to come from the depths of your soul, inspired itself out of God's own power.

It has to be like a bottomless well which, every time you think you've plumbed the last final drop, springs afresh.

Seven times Peter, really?

Is your mind so small?

Not seven, seventy times seven, a number you can't ever count to.

God's love is so far beyond our expectations.

Every time we think we've got it nailed down, sorted out, the holy excess of the love of God comes pouring over us.

We celebrated that Holy excess this morning as we poured water over Anders' little head, and marked him with the sign of the cross, and we will soon again as we share the everlasting feast of God's holy communion.

But the numbers don't end with Peter's equivocal question.

In the parable itself, we're told the master is owed by his servant, ten thousand talents.

In those days 10 000 was the largest number there was, and a talent was the largest monetary unit there was.

It's big in other words.

To give you some idea, in today's money, conservatively, 10 000 talents of gold would be equivalent to about 1.5 Billion dollars, an incalculable debt, and one impossible to pay back.

On the other hand, the hundred denarii, equates to about 3000 dollars, a miniscule sum in comparison, and a debt which could fairly easily be paid off in a matter of months.

Again, the numbers are deliberately saying something beyond their face value.

Look at the unbelievable and exorbitant gesture of mercy made by the King in forgiving so massive an amount.

Then consider the vastly lesser debt which the forgiven servant refuses to forgo for another.

Not only that, but he then has him thrown in prison where his ability to work off the debt which hasn't been forgiven is severely curtailed.

How can we ask, like Peter, for a number?

Can I get away with only forgiving a couple of times, Lord?

7 times maybe?

Then is my job done?

Then can I recall the debts I'm owed?

Then can I get angry and punish others if they cannot repay me?

These numbers don't add up.

We need a forgiveness audit.

This approach to relationship with God and with each other doesn't add up.

It's not about the numbers.

It's about relationship, and relationships can't be measured in this way.

God's love for you and me is so in excess of anything we can imagine, on receiving new life, forgiven life, we too are to be forgiving of others.

Not in small or calculable ways, but with every part of God's grace we're given, and for always and forever.

What a way of life little Anders has been born into this morning in baptism!

What a way of life we are each called into through faith.

Forgiveness can be hard, demanding work, it can require much of us.

We ought not pretend it is a simple or easy calling.

But it does open the way to new possibilities of relationship.

And that's what God is all about.

Relationship with each other and relationship with God, all grounded and shaped in love.

None of this can be counted, rather it is God's Holy Excess of grace we can always count on.

Praise be to God!

Amen.

Amen.