

Title: Calculating Forgiveness  
Date: 9/17/2023 (Proper 19, Year A)  
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church  
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)  
Readings: [Exodus 14:19-31](#); [Psalm 114](#); [Romans 14:1-12](#); [Matthew 18:21-35](#)  
Video Link: [https://youtu.be/GnMozmh\\_4Uo?t=1272](https://youtu.be/GnMozmh_4Uo?t=1272)

Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord,  
at the presence of the God of Jacob,  
Who turned the hard rock into a pool of water  
and flint-stone into a flowing spring (Ps 114:7-8).

**Amen.**

These two verses from Psalm 114 bring up an interesting question:  
Is it more difficult to turn hard rock into a pool of water, or  
to transform a hardened heart into one that overflows with grace?

Both feel like impossible tasks AND our God is a God that has brought life out of a tomb.<sup>1</sup>

Last week, I preached on recipes for salvation that we find in the Bible. There are recipes that leave room for interpretation...once you've grasped the underlying principles that bring out the flavors. An example of this was found in Paul's letter to the Romans: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8) and "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

Everything else flows from that basic principle. Instead of salt, fat, acid, heat, the recipe for salvation is built on faith, hope, love, and grace.

There are recipes that seem more rigid; follow these steps exactly...or else. An example of this was found in the Gospel according to Matthew. Jesus outlined the steps for dealing with a member of the church who has sinned against you: first talk to them alone, then with one or two others, then tell it to the church. As a last resort, relegate them to the margins, but always ALWAYS strive to stay in relationship in the hope that one day you may be restored to one another.

One key thing to remember is that we don't follow these recipes to earn salvation. We follow these recipes in response to the grace of God, to live as if we know, as if we truly believe, that God has **already** set us free from sin, that sin no longer has the power to separate us from God. Now we turn back toward God when we've missed the mark, and we strive to repair the ruptures in our relationship with God, God's people, and God's creation.

Of course, knowing how to do this is one thing. Actually doing it? It's a whole other matter.

In today's passage, Peter asks a follow up question to the teaching we heard last week. "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" (Mat 18:21).

He probably already had a couple of people in mind when he asked this question.

"Jesus, how many times do I have to go through that cycle for staying in relationship before we call it done? What's the magic formula? Forgiveness x seven = salvation for **me**, because **I've** done **my** part, right?"

But Jesus didn't let him off the hook that easily. "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Some versions of the Bible translate this as number as "seventy times seven." Either way, it's a MUCH higher number than Peter's opening offer.

Peter wants to know the exact formula to follow, the recipe, so that he could consider himself to be in right relationship with God and with other members of the church. Jesus counters with a ridiculously high number, and then follows it up with a parable.

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. He starts with the slave that owes him ten thousand talents. For context, in Greek both "ten thousand" and "talent" are used to represent the largest possible number.<sup>2</sup> An ordinary laborer would have to work 6000 days to earn just one talent.<sup>3</sup> 6000 days! Now multiply that by 10,000.

By using another astronomical number, Jesus reminds the listeners that we can't put a price on forgiveness; we can't calculate our way toward salvation. He came to transform the way we think, the way we treat one another.

The king chooses to forgive this enormous debt that the servant couldn't possibly ever repay. And then the servant turns around and runs into someone who owes him 100 denarii, or a 100 days of work. Instead of showing his fellow slave the same forgiveness that the king showed him, he threw him into prison.

On the one hand, it doesn't make sense to throw him in prison because he can't repay that debt if he can't work. On the other hand, this forces this slave's family and friends to try to raise money between them to repay that debt. This means that **they** have to work extra hard or have to call in the debts owed to **them**. Either way, this continues a punishing cycle rather than transform it into a virtuous one.

The other slaves found out and told the king, and the king handed him over to be tortured until he could pay his entire debt. This calculates to be 160,000 years, basically the rest of his life. This feels like an over-correction.

Jesus ends this parable with "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you," as in eternal torture, "if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

I have so.many.questions.

What did the servant spend those 10,000 talents on? How much money did the king have, if he could afford to lend this much money? Should any one person have that much wealth? What sparked the reckoning, this project of collecting debts? Will God really torture us if we don't forgive our siblings in Christ?

How many of you have heard of the concept of an "emotional bank account" or a "love bank account"?

It's a way of tracking how other people treat us. They make deposits by doing nice things for us. They withdraw "money" from the account when they hurt us. In seminary, people talked in terms of a repository of goodwill. When a priest wants to do something new, something that may challenge the congregation, they're supposed to factor in whether they've generated enough goodwill to pull that off.

These are helpful concepts in that they remind us to be aware of the impact of our words and actions. Even if we meant well, even if we had good intentions, "Sometimes even the right reasons have the wrong consequences,"<sup>4</sup> as Ahsoka Tano says in the new Star Wars series bearing her name.

When I have conversations with couples preparing for marriage, I use this program called Prepare/Enrich. They each answer a series of questions, and then the program scores them individually and compares their answers to see how much they are in agreement. Before we walk through the results, I make it clear that the scores don't predict whether or not their marriage will succeed. The scores make them aware of their strength and growing edges; it gives them a place to start from. The rest is up to them.

Numbers are simply a starting point. They tell us what we're trying to measure. They answer the questions we ask, and it's important to stop and check whether we're asking the right questions.

How do we measure abundance? Bank balances, the quantity of our friends, or the quality of our friendships? How do we know whether a church has moved from surviving to thriving? How did we come to adopt our standards of measurement?

How do we know our value? Do we try to calculate the Return on Investment before deciding whether to stay in relationship with someone? How do we know whether more forgiveness is actually a good thing, for us or for them? How long do we wait? Why is it so hard to find a foolproof formula for all this?

We can take away several teachings from this parable. One is that we should always forgive others because we have been forgiven by God...or that God will forgive us only as much as we forgive others.

After all, as part of the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." In other versions, we ask God to "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us," or "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

Another teaching is that if we do not forgive, we end up carrying the weight. If the person or people we're mad at aren't interested in making amends or repairing the relationship, then we end up paying the price if we stay angry or upset or anxious. So, we forgive for the sake of our health and well-being, even when we make it a point not to forget.

Moreover, we hold this alongside last week's teaching, which focuses on accountability and addressing the harmful effects of sin. There's no reason we can't do that AND forgive.

Any of these teachings may apply, depending on your situation.

AND it is a good thing to ask questions of the parable, to ask questions when preaching a parable with the language of master and slave in the modern day against the backdrop of US history. It is a good thing to wonder how Jesus is trying to reframe something we might take as a given.

Parables provide a starting point, not a one-size-fits-all recipe.  
Parables demand conversation, not unthinking obedience.

Instead of being focused on what other people owe us, we can focus on the gifts we have to share with the world.

Instead of letting their calculations determine our value, we can stand confidently, knowing our own worth.

Instead of looking at what we lack, let's take inventory of what we have.

Instead of thinking "I have to," let's ask for help, for when we choose to be part of this community, we are all part of one body. As Paul writes, "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves" (Romans 14:7).

Instead of looking for easy answers, may we strive to embrace the fullness of this life together.

May we remember that forgiveness is about not passing judgment or keeping accounts but endings giving rise to new beginnings.

May God grant us wisdom and grace so that flint-stones that spark the fires of conflict may become flowing springs that bring life.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> E. Lane Alderman Jr., "[Pastoral Perspective \(Psalm 114\)](#)," in *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Additional Essays*, vol. 13, Feasting on the Word (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 11.

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis R. Donelson, [“Exegetical Perspective on Matthew 18:21–35,”](#) in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 71.

<sup>3</sup> [https://watv.org/bible\\_word/monetary-standards/](https://watv.org/bible_word/monetary-standards/)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.sideshow.com/blog/best-quotes-star-wars-ahsoka-premiere>