

The Arithmetic of God

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(The sermon is based on two texts, Matthew 18:21-35 and Romans 14:1-12. The texts can be found at the end of the sermon.)

The first real case of pastoral counseling I had was actually with a neighbor, not a parishioner. I am going to call her Ashley, although that is not her real name.

Ashley moved in about two years after we did. She had the neighborhood dog, who spent as much time at our house as hers. She was in real estate, and doing quite well.

One night she came over to invite us to dinner, then told us that her girlfriend was going to be there, and she hoped we did not have a problem with that. We didn't and we had a lovely dinner that night.

Two months later, just after Christmas, I was taking the trash out and saw Ashley packing up her car. She hadn't said anything about going on vacation, and we usually looked after each other's houses if the other was gone.

Ashley came over and told me that her father had just died. Apparently he fell asleep while smoking, on Christmas Eve, and burned down the family house, which had been in their family for generations. Ashley was driving up to Delaware to be with her family. She also had learned she had been made executor of the estate, so it was going to be a pretty long trip. To make matters worse, she had a very conflicted relationship with her father. He was abusive, and she had run away from home just to get away from him.

We said goodbye, and I just held her in my prayers until she returned home a few weeks later. I was out, taking out the garbage again as she pulled into her driveway. I walked over and said hello, and she asked if she could come over after she had unpacked.

We chatted about her trip for a while, and then told me the real reason she wanted to talk. While she was up in Delaware, her girl friend called, and demanded that Ashley invite her up there, so she could be with her. She explained that it was a very stressful time, and that a lot of her family did not know she was gay, and now was not the time to shock with a suddenly appearing girlfriend. The girlfriend gave her an ultimatum. "If you really love me," she said, "you will invite me up. If you don't invite me, I will not be here when you get back."

And in fact she had taken all her stuff out of Ashley's house, and left a note saying it was over. "I can usually forgive people pretty easily," Ashley said. "I can just let go of things, and act like

they never happened. But this is different. I can't forgive her. She hurt me."

"You have never HAD to forgive anyone else before," I said. "All the other times you could just shake it off. This the first time you have actually had someone really hurt you, and the first time you have had to forgive."

I think a lot of us labor under the same misconception that Ashley had—that forgiveness was the ability to just shrug things off as if they had never happened.

The Gospel lesson this morning is all about forgiveness. First Peter wants a statute of limitations on forgiveness. How often do I have to forgive someone? Suppose they do something that hurts me. And I forgive them. Then they do it again. And I forgive them again. And then, they do it AGAIN, so I forgive them AGAIN...how many times do I have to do that? At what point can I say, "Enough is enough is enough and be done with it? Is seven times enough?"

Peter understands how hard forgiveness can be, and that it can be even harder when the person we need to forgive is not exactly receptive to the idea that they are doing things that need forgiving.

Have you ever been in a situation like that? Someone does something that hurts us one time, well, we can forgive that. They do it again, ok, we can forgive this one too. But you get five times, six times, seven times, and about that time you should be off the hook. No one should have to forgive someone that many times!

Jesus does not give him any wiggle room.

"Seventy TIMES seven," he says, which is a way of saying, "There is no end to forgiveness."

Then Jesus tells a story. Once a man owed about a billion dollars.

He couldn't pay the debt and was threatened with prison. But he begged and pleaded, and the debt was forgiven. He ran into a man who owed a few bucks, and demanded his money. The man could not pay, and he had him thrown into debtor's prison, until he could come up with the money.

In other words, forgiveness is VERY important.

What is so important about forgiveness? Oh, sure we should be able to get past the little piddly things. We can't go holding grudges for everything! But when we get to the serious stuff, why should we have to forgive that?

It costs to forgive. It cost you something to get past the hurts that have been inflicted on you over time. It is not easy. It is much easier to stay angry, to stay bitter, to nurse the grudges, and sometimes even go looking for them.

Frederick Buechner wrote, “Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king.”

Let’s be honest. If you have ever really nursed a grudge, you know how good that can feel. But Buechner goes on to say, “The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

The first reason we forgive is because it is good for us. Hanging on to anger, or to hurts may be easier than forgiving, but it is clearly more dangerous. The problem is, it is not like we have these little boxes inside of us, where we can store hurt or anger in relative isolation. It is not like, “Well, I have this thing that someone did to me, so I will put in this box here, and keep it separate from everything else in my life.” Its not like you can store your hurt or anger or bitterness in emotional Tupperware, which keeps it separate from everything else in your life.

No, hanging on to anger is like keeping fish in your refrigerator too long. After a while it starts to stink. And what’s worse, it starts to make everything else in your refrigerator stink. Anger, bitterness, past hurts fester in our lives, and they bleed over into all the other areas of our lives. Usually in small ways, but sometimes in huge ways.

When people nurture a grudge, they start treating other hurts like that grudge. Have you ever known someone who was perpetually angry? If you scratch the surface of that person, you will find past hurts that they were not able to deal with in a healthy way. They start off angry at some person who legitimately hurt them, but then end up angry because their paper is late, the President did something they disagree with, or there is a social injustice halfway across the world. I got called down the ER one day when I was a chaplain to minister to a man whose wife had just committed suicide. What was so sad about that was that he had tried to get her committed to the psych ward three times. The first time she refused to leave her car, and come into the hospital and he did not want security to have to bring her in. Twice it was full, and the only thing we could do was to ship her down to Anchorage, which was a complicated, expensive and drawn out process. So on Sunday night we discharged her, and on Monday morning she sent her kids off to school, went to the upstairs bathroom, and shot herself in the head.

I was angry and hurt. We were supposed to help people like that, and we failed her. Two weeks after that I was sitting in a meeting where the facilitator was pretty caustic, and before I knew what I was doing, I stood up, and told the facilitator that I didn't need his...well, particular style of leading a meeting, and stormed out.

I was not half as angry with that facilitator as I was with the Hospital and our inability to help this person.

So how do we deal with forgiveness?

1) First, we need to acknowledge that there are often things we need to forgive. We need to acknowledge that what other people do sometimes hurts us, and that we need to do the hard work of forgiveness rather than just brush it off.

In Alaska and North Carolina I did some work with troubled churches, and more than once I saw a church that was conflicted, and stuck, and as we got to know the history of that church, often there was a pastor in the past who had somehow hurt the congregation. Maybe they had an affair or some other violation of trust and had to resign. Maybe they left quickly, and the congregation felt like they were left in a lurch. Maybe they were an abusive sort of personality, and without doing anything technically wrong, they abused their power as pastor. Anyway, what often happens in this kind of church is that the congregation takes it out on the next pastor, or the next few pastors. I worked with a church in Fairbanks that, in my time there, went through a pastor about every two years.

Or, having been hurt, and not willing to admit it, they misplaced their anger. Sometimes the session was the focus, sometimes it was a program of the church, sometimes they just all turned on each other. But they were not willing to admit that they had been hurt! So they never dealt with it directly. And they never got over the hurt.

2) Keep your accounts current. Last week Jesus said that if someone hurts you, deal with it. And deal with it, with that person. And if you need to, get help from others. Don't let things fester, because some things just get bigger over time. A paper cut can turn into a festering wound if it get infected. If you are carrying a wide variety of hurts, they will bleed into one another, and start bleeding into other areas of your life.

If you have to work backwards, then do it that way. But don't let hurts accumulate. Little things can pile up, and a whole lot of little things soon become big things.

Some of you remember S&H Green stamps. You buy something from a store, and you get a strip of green stamps, which you put in a little booklet, designed to hold the green stamps. When your book is full, you can redeem it at an S&H center, where you could trade your stamps for toasters,

or blenders, or other things for your house.

Well, we do that with relationships. Someone does something to us that we don't like. We don't blow up, but we don't forget it. We turn that into anger stamps, or just irritation stamps, and we post them in our little relationship book. Something else happens, and we put that in the book. Again, we feel some sleight from someone, or some small hurt, and we just post it in the book. Then, something else happens...our spouse is late picking us up, say, and we go to put our anger stamps in the book, but lo and behold—the book is full.

So we redeem it. The whole book. All over that one small event. We blow up, and let our spouse have the full brunt of all the past hurts and irritations.

Instead of saving them up, we need to deal with them as they come, so they are not hanging around. It is easy to forgive someone for one or two simple things they have done to hurt us. It is much harder when that one or two has turned into a multitude of offenses.

3) If you can, let go of it. The Buddha said holding on to anger is like holding on to a hot rock. It only burns you. Yes, maybe someone hurt you, but is holding onto that hurt helping anything? What would your life be like if you could let go of it? You don't have to hold onto these things. Too often we carry baggage that we just don't need to carry. We don't need to carry other people's baggage. Other people get hurt, and while we can commiserate with them, we don't have to take their hurts as our hurts. We can help other people without getting sucked into their hurts as if they were our hurts. We can support other people without taking on their anger as our anger. And we don't need all the baggage that we carry with us.

In the summer of 1986 my first wife and I moved to Bonn, Germany for a year of theological study at the University there. We were going to be there for a year, and so we packed enough stuff for the year. I literally had to sit on my suitcases, and wrap a belt around them to keep them closed. In spite of the fact that it was August, I wore a heavy winter coat, and a sweater, and had my pockets stuffed with socks and underwear. I had a backpack and a carry one, both also stuffed full. She was as weighted down as I was.

When I checked in at Newark airport, the agent said, "You are seventy pounds overweight!" "What does that mean?" I asked.

"I am supposed to charge you five dollars a pound," she said.

We barely had enough money to get us to Bonn, and could not afford the charges for the extra weight. But I remembered I was in Newark.

"How much is it if I pay you?" I asked.

"Twenty dollars," said the agent, and after a furtive payment was made, we were on our way.

We had hitchhiked on a plane to Europe. I bought tickets from a company called Airhitch, which bought and sold empty seats on a variety of planes to Europe. The ticket (really a voucher) was not specific in terms of destination or date. We just knew that sometime in August we would be

on a plane to Europe. We had no idea which country.

As it turned out, we got a flight to London. We would have enjoyed it, except that we had to drag all our baggage around with us, first from the airport to the city, then to our B&B. I still had to arrange transportation from London to Bonn.

After two days in London, we bought train tickets to Bonn. We dragged our luggage to the station. By this time the metal luggage carriers we brought with us had all been destroyed by the weight and volume of our baggage, so we were each carrying my two suitcases, two carry-ons, and a variety of loose, extraneous things that did not fit in our luggage.

The train left around 10 at night, and would arrive in Bonn around 1 the next afternoon. Most compartments were full, but we found one that was almost empty. We threw our mountain of stuff in, and sat down. When the conductor came to check our tickets, he frowned, made to say something, then obviously thought better of it, and moved on.

Later I found out we were in a First Class compartment—and we didn't have a First Class ticket. I guess the conductor figured out it would be more trouble to move us than to let us stay where we were!

So we are on the train, and able to rest for a while. Except that I am no dummy. I know that England is on an island, and that trains do not travel well on water. So I also knew that we would probably have to get all our stuff off the train, and then onto a ferry, off the ferry and back onto another train. Which is exactly what we had to do. We hit the docks at around 1 am, lugged our stuff off the train, which was not hard, but then had to stand in line, move our mountain of luggage with us, and then move the mountain up two flights of stairs onto the ferry.

After a fitful rest on the ferry (afraid that someone might steal our luggage) we docked around 4:30 am, dragged our stuff down three flights of stairs, and then scrambled to find a place on the next train. It was packed but we did manage to find a place for us and our luggage. As we got closer to Bonn, I started getting our stuff ready, only to learn that the train did not actually to Bonn—it went to Bonn Beul, which was across the river from Bonn. In order to get to Bonn we had to change trains in Cologne.

That was a minor disaster. While I was handing luggage to my wife, who had boarded the train to Bonn, it left the station. I had half the luggage, both tickets, no sleep, and was about ready to just leave the bags where they were. But another train came by soon, I met up with my wife at the station in Bonn, and we were there—almost. We had to get our stuff from the station to the dorm where we were staying, which took three trips in the small car of the Hausfrau who managed the dorm.

Later I was relating this to one of my German friends and he said, “Why didn't you just check your bags in London?”

We could do that? You mean, we could have checked our bags, let someone else worry about them? You mean we could have given our bags to someone at the station London, and had a much

more leisurely, enjoyable trip, than the hellish journey we had to endure? You mean we carried all those bags all that way—FOR NOTHING?

How often do we do with other things in life? How often do we carry things around with us that only weigh us down, that are not needed, that are heavy burdens we don't need to carry?

How often do we carry past hurts, grudges, slights and anger when all they do is weigh us down?

How much emotional baggage do we carry that we have no business dragging around?

Drop it, if you can. Let go of those things you do not need. Let go of the things that just weigh you down. Let go of your burdens, especially those that keep you from forgiving and moving on. It's not worth the effort.

But sometimes we cannot just let it go. Sometimes it is like glue, sticking to us. We can't just let go.

4) Let someone carry the load with you. Sometimes the hurts are too big for us to deal with on our own. That is when we need help. We need other people to help us carry the baggage. We are not alone. Sometimes whatever we are dealing with is large enough that we need to walk with other people. We need them to help us go through our baggage, and help us decide what to keep.

Sometimes we just need to hear someone say, "Do you really need to carry this?" I have a hard time getting rid of clothes...or at least I did until I met Angelee. More than once she has helped me go through my clothes, by holding a pair of pants, or a shirt I haven't worn in years and asking, do you really need this? Sometimes we just need another person to ask us, do you really need to hold on this?

Sometimes we need people to take our stuff from us. Sometimes we need people to carry things we have no business carrying. Sometimes we just need a friend who can help us carry the things that are too heavy for us.

And finally, we need to remember that we are forgiven...always by God, hopefully by the people in our church community. No matter what we have done, God will forgive us. God does not cling to our past sins, even if we do. God does not pin those sins to us, even if we won't let go of them. God does not hold our past against us, even if we still do.

The reason for forgiveness is so we can be healthy people. Remember my friend Ashley? She and I had a long talk about how she had been wronged. I explained that her girlfriend had emotionally blackmailed her, and how that was not a characteristic of a healthy relationship. Ashley learned to forgive, so she would not be carrying around the pain all her life. She learned to forgive, so that the rest of her relationships would not be defined by that harmful one.

By learning what was wrong with that relationship, she could focus on what a healthy relationship looked like.

And a few months after our conversations, she showed up at my door one day. “Guess what!” she said. “I’m in love.” I smiled at her. “And,” she was quick to add, “it’s a healthy relationship!”

ROMANS 14:1-12

1Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

2Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. 3Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. 4Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

5Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. 6Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

7We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 8If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. 9For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

10Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 11For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

12So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

GOSPEL MATTHEW 18:21-35

21Then 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?” 22Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

23“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ 27And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ 29Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ 30But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32Then

his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' 34And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."