

United + Memory + Hope = Kingdom Math

Matthew 18:21-35

Whitefish United Methodist Church

September 11, 2011

- ✦ In the decade since 9/11, lower Manhattan's most visible tribute to the thousands killed there has been a pair of ethereal light beams that cut through the night sky on the anniversary of the terror attacks each year.
- ✦ The glowing columns, echoes of the toppled Twin Towers, draw eyes upward, away from what has been derided as a massive "pit" filled with heavy construction equipment. Today, however, all eyes will be on the ground.
- ✦ The unveiling of a tangible, permanent monument at the World Trade Center on the 10th anniversary will at last transform part of the site into a space of remembrance, capping a decade of painstaking planning and progress stunted by conflicting visions, financial disputes and controversy.
- ✦ Now that the memorial is nearly complete, cost estimates range from \$60-70 billion for construction alone, with an estimated \$700,000 per year in operational funds, including massive amounts of electricity—enough to power 800 homes.
- ✦ Of course, those are just the financial costs—because it's impossible to count the cost in human energy, grief, and even hope.

- ✦ In the weeks leading up to today's anniversary, have you wondered about the cost of producing all the TV, internet, and other media reflections on this day? And how would Jesus' kingdom math, as expressed in today's gospel lesson from Matthew, apply?
- ✦ One of my clergy friends' late wife Janet always said: "There's a fine line between being a Christian and being a sucker." She had the chance to experience that to the utmost when she died at age 54 of cancer. Her faith, though tested, helped her resist the temptation to think of herself as a "sucker"—a delusional fool.
- ✦ If you take it seriously, Christianity is a religion in which the sinners have all the advantages. They can hurt you a bunch of times—they can talk trash about you every time you leave the room, and it is your job to excuse them with no thought of getting even.
- ✦ Because the burden is on *you*. For you have been forgiven yourself, and God expects you to do unto others as God has done unto you.
- ✦ And that's quite a burden. When you practice that kind of forgiveness, you walk that fine line between being a Christian and a sucker.
- ✦ When I ask our youth group kids what they think is the most important part of being a Christian, they answer one of two things: to love, and to forgive. Jesus preached a gospel of forgiveness, and he came to teach us how to forgive each other.
- ✦ In youth group, we try to teach, in fun and in serious ways, the essentials of being a Christian. Two thousand years ago, in the original school of Christian discipleship, an apostle named Peter was always trying to outshine the other students.

- ✦ From his teacher's point of view, there was no way that the importance of forgiveness could be overemphasized, because it was, and is, so hard to do. Time and time again, Jesus emphasized how essential forgiveness is to his gospel message:
- ✦ “Love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5:44)
- ✦ “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” (Matthew 5:7)
- ✦ “When someone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other cheek.” (Matthew 5:39)
- ✦ Peter accepted the fact that if a person were to follow Jesus, forgiveness simply had to take the place of vengeance in the heart of every single disciple. But Peter still didn't like the idea very much.
- ✦ Peter wanted to know how often he had to forgive—he needed a number because forgiveness does not come naturally to human beings. After all, if God is willing to stay with me in spite of my weakness, my self-righteousness, my desire to nurse my wounds, then who am I to hold these same things against someone else?
- ✦ I know I should confess my own sins rather than keep track of yours, only it's hard to stay focused on my own limitations. I would so much rather stay focused on yours, especially when they are hurtful to me.
- ✦ “If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? Seven times?” Peter is thinking smugly to himself that that is a lot. But Jesus answers: “Not seven times, but seventy times seven times.”

- ✦ And that means that forgiveness is not really a quantifiable quality, but a whole different way of being, drawn from God's very self, whose nature it is to offer grace."
- ✦ As the psalmist says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far does God remove our transgressions from us." (Ps. 103:12)
- ✦ But Jesus may be afraid that Peter hasn't quite grasped the message, and so he tells a parable in which God appears as a king who forgives one of his servants a very large debt. But immediately, after the servant has been forgiven, he encounters someone who owes him a debt. Instead of offering mercy, he grabs the other man by the throat and demands that payment be made.
- ✦ When the man cannot pay, the unforgiving servant has him thrown into a prison. The news reaches the king, who calls the unforgiving servant in, withdraws his debt cancellation, and orders him to be handed over to be punished until the entire debt is paid, which is an impossibility since the amount that is owed is about fifty million times the ordinary daily wage in ancient times.
- ✦ And so Jesus, the embodiment of grace, leaves the disciples with harsh words indeed. But Jesus, because he wanted them to pass kingdom math, wanted to startle the Christian community awake to the reality that divine mercy and human mercy are truly intertwined.
- ✦ We pray that ourselves every time we pray the Lord's prayer, saying, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Have you ever noticed that this is the only line in the whole prayer that has a condition on it? That there is an essential relationship between our ability to forgive other people and God's willingness to offer forgiveness to us.

- ✦ Believe me, I know it is difficult to listen to a sermon on forgiveness today, September 11th. And yet this passage from Matthew comes up in the lectionary, established many, many years ago, exactly on this day when many of us would rather seek revenge. It's hard to preach on it, too, in ways that are honest and real.
- ✦ It's one thing to forgive individual people in our own lives—that's plenty hard. And it's another to forgive the "enemy" in a world like this one—a world in which the news each day is filled with inexplicable and tragic violence, some of it done in the name of God.
- ✦ How is that possible, and does it make us merely suckers rather than true Christians if we try?
- ✦ Today, all over the land, Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Buddhists, yes, even most Muslims, remember 9-11 and pray that we may love across our differences, hoping together that the world we leave our children will not be awash with vengeance and unresolved hatreds.
- ✦ We come today to receive a vision of a better world, of a peaceable kingdom. And we come to gain the strength to pursue it.
- ✦ How difficult it is today to hear the commandment to forgive. One theologian puts it like this: "We who follow Christ are always being commanded to do things we cannot do. We are commanded to love, to serve without counting the cost.
- ✦ But the hardest of all is the commandment to forgive. We are bidden to do it, not because it is possible on our own, but because as we try what we are commanded to do, it is given to us as a gift from God."
- ✦ All right, you say, so it's a gift. But how do we get it? Forgiveness is a function of grace, and although you can't make yourself forgive anyone, you can at least try to understand the connection between how

- good it is to have God accept you with all your brokenness and inadequacies, and your reaction to those who have injured you, even deeply, terribly injured you.
- ✦ Michael Lindvall, pastor of the Brick Presbyterian church in New York City, and at one time a small-town Midwestern pastor as well, says his church's worship today will be characterized by three words: memorial, united, hope.
 - ✦ First, there will be a memorial to those who died and who lost so much. But, he says, he will avoid the vocabularies of both victimhood and martyrdom—because victimhood diminishes those who lost so much and martyrdom conveys religious division and intention for conflict.
 - ✦ He adds that “human beings are united by a great many things, many of them perverse. People are united by race and language, sect and geography; too often they are united by hatred and anger. To be united by hope would be exceptional.”
 - ✦ Would that today we could remember and in our remembering be united in hope. It's no accident that the 9/11 memorial features lots of water—fountains with water falling inward. They call to mind collapsing buildings and tears.
 - ✦ But water, especially but not uniquely for Christians, speaks of hope. Like God, it washes clean and refreshes. Tom asked me on our trip what I was passionate about—I replied “water and hope.” Interesting. So with that in mind, let's focus on the hope that comes from cleansing tears and the waters of our baptism—helping us to put on Christ instead of the wounds of the past.

- ✦ Of course there are times when you cannot forgive. But in those times you can at least pray that the time will come when you can forgive. And even if you cannot pray that prayer, you can be honest before God in confessing that you cannot. God can take it.
- ✦ God gives us the ability to forgive, but our part is in opening ourselves to the desire for, the possibility that we will be able to forgive.
- ✦ You have heard it said “an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” And if for no other reason, it is good to open yourself to the possibility of forgiving others for selfish reasons.
- ✦ One of my favorite authors is Mary Gordon, a Catholic, whose novels focus a lot on guilt and forgiveness. Final Payments is one of her best books. Mary Gordon was asked one summer by the New York Times to write an essay on one of the seven deadly sins—anger and its accompanying vengeance.
- ✦ She admitted she knew a lot about this sin. She told the story of how one hot summer afternoon, her house was full of people, and she was fixing dinner for them. But no one offered to help. She was stewing in her own juices, when her seventy-eight year old mother and her two small children insisted that she stop what she was doing and take them swimming.
- ✦ They sat in the car in her driveway, leaning on the horn and shouting her name out the window so all the neighbors could hear them, loudly reminding everyone that she had promised to take them to the pond.
- ✦ Mary Gordon said she lost it at that point, and she flew outside and jumped on the hood of the car. She pounded on the windshield. She screamed at her mother and her children. And then a frightening thing happened. “I became a huge bird,” she said, “a carrion crow. My legs

became hard stalks, my eyes were sharp and vicious. I developed a murderous beak. Greasy black feathers took the place of arms. I flapped and flapped, and I blotted out the sun's light with my flapping.”

- ✦ Even after she had been forced off the hood of the car, she said it took her awhile to come back to herself, and when she did she was appalled, because she realized she had genuinely frightened her children. Her son said to her: “I was scared because I didn't know who you were.”
- ✦ “Sin makes the sinner unrecognizable,” Gordon concluded, and the only cure is forgiveness. But the problem is our anger and desire to get even is so invigorating, so exciting, that forgiveness can seem like we are weak and, well—a sucker.
- ✦ “If you have ever cherished a resentment, you know how right it can make you feel to have someone in the world whom you believe is all wrong. You may not be up to admitting it yet, but one of the great benefits of having an enemy is that you get to look good by comparison. It also helps to have someone to blame for why your life is not turning out the way it was supposed to.” So says Barbara Brown Taylor, the Episcopal priest.
- ✦ Once in an interview about some movements toward peace in the Israeli Palestinian conflict, Linda Wertheimer asked a correspondent in the Middle East: “how are people reacting? After all, losing an enemy can be as upsetting as losing a friend.”
- ✦ Have you ever thought of that before? When you allow your enemy to stop being your enemy all the rules change.

- ✦ Why don't we forgive more often? Because it is scary to lay down your arms, to trade in your pride and power on the off-chance that you may discover something more valuable than either of them.
- ✦ “To forgive, says Mary Gordon, is to give up the exhilaration of one's own unassailable rightness.” And there is loss in that, but what we gain instead is the chance to live a new way, free from the bitterness and resentment that steals our joy in life. Free from the self-righteousness that turns us into carrion crows who blot out the sun with our flapping. And we do this to ourselves.
- ✦ I have a confession to make: I suffered from a horrible case of math anxiety when I was a student many years ago. I wasn't very good at math, and I didn't think I could be.
- ✦ But I am trying to do better at kingdom math—maybe I'm up to about a C-.
- ✦ Yet I, we, are being forgiven every day of our lives. We are being set free by the One who designed this strange form of mathematics, this kingdom math. The one who forgives us without limit, without counting the number of times.
- ✦ How often should we forgive? How good are you at kingdom math?
- ✦ On this day when we celebrate our Sunday school new year and remember 9/11, may we teach our children well, by our example of forgiveness and our joy in being forgiven. After all, they need to pass kingdom math, just as we do.
- ✦ We pray that it will be so, by the grace of God. Amen.

Sources:

Michael Lindvall, "9/11: Ten Years Later," *Christian Century* August 23, 2011.

Mary Gordon, "Anger," *New York Times*, June 13, 1993.