

Jim Gill

September 17, 2017

"Math"

Exodus 14:19-31 Matthew 18:21-35 Romans 14:1-12

INTRODUCTION TO EXODUS 14:19-31

Last week we read about the tenth plague that finally broke Pharaoh's resolve to NOT let Moses people go. The children of Israel did pack up and leave only to discover that Pharaoh changed his mind again and began to pursue them with his army of chariots. Hear the word of the Lord from Exodus 14:19-31

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 18:21-35

Years ago parents complained when their children came home with homework that came complete with what was called, "New Math." (Now I think the math is even Newer and it's called Common Core-and some are looking for a cure for the Common Core)

This morning we're going to talk about an even different kind of math--God's math. In God's Math when it comes to marriage $1+1=1$ (when the two become one). In God's math, like we talked about last Sunday when according to Jesus' promise to be in our midst when 2 or 3 gather together $1+1+1=4$ (counting Jesus in the midst). This week we look at another aspect of God's math. It's another how many question. It's a question that Peter only asked once. Hear the word of God from Matthew 18:21-28

Let's pray. Lord, we not only find it hard to forgive, we find it hard to want to forgive. We would rather hold a grudge, nurse a grudge, and cradle a grudge than bury one. Yet you forgive us, again and again. Yet you told us to pray asking that you forgive us as we forgive others. Teach us the way of forgiveness.

Sixteen years ago, nineteen members of a terrorist group hijacked four commercial passenger jet airliners. The hijackers intentionally crashed two of the airliners into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, killing everyone on board. The hijackers crashed a third airliner into the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C. The fourth plane crashed into a field near Shanksville in rural Pennsylvania after some of its passengers and flight crew attempted to retake control of the plane, which the hijackers had redirected toward Washington, D.C it is believed to target the White House. I've been to the crater in Shanksville and seen the memorial there. I've seen the notes and letters and pictures from surviving family members.

The overwhelming majority of casualties in all four attacks were civilians, including nationals of over 70 countries. (1) Included among those 3,000 victims

were 836 first responders, firefighters and police personnel, who had come to rescue people. 836! 836 perished running INTO the buildings.

"Twelve Step" recovery programs, like Alcoholics Anonymous all emphasize that recovery is a day-by-day, sometimes even an "hour-by-hour," journey. That is why alcoholics and addicts are always "recovering," never fully "cured." They know that every single day is a chance to move forward and resist the undertow of the old demons. But every day is also a day where weakness or despair might lead to a slip up, a stumble, a bad choice.

Since 9/11 we have all been on a "day-by-day" journey of recovery---recovery from horror, recovery from hatred, recovery from the realization that not everyone in the world loves us; recovery from a fear of the future; recovery from grief and despair; recovery from a desire for vengeance.

Events like the attacks of 9/11 or the attack of the week like the one on the Tube in London this week and the missile of the week from North Korea and continuing aggression in so many places in the world we cry out-- Why does HUMAN nature, or should I say INHUMAN nature drive some to destroy others? In the wake of fires in the west and floods in the southeast we cry out why does Mother Nature rise up and destroy?

These are some of the FAQ's, the most Frequently Asked Questions when the latest tragedy hits. This morning however, our gospel lesson addresses another question, an Infrequently Asked question. How many times must I forgive?

As with so many of the stories of Jesus, this parable of the debtors arose out of a question that was posed to him. Simon Peter said to him: "Master, if my brother sins against me, how many times should I forgive him, seven times? By asking this question Peter is expecting praise because Scribal law said, "If a man transgresses one time, forgive him. If a man transgresses two times, forgive him. If a man transgresses three times, forgive him. If a man transgresses four times, do not forgive him."

Pete is expecting Jesus to say: "Well done Peter." Peter thought he was being magnanimous. Peter doubled the limit of three times and adds one more for good measure. But Peter was operating in human math. Jesus was operating on God's math. Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven." 490 times. (Does it blow you away that Jesus knew the times tables? 2,000 years ago math is really OLD Math!)

WE FORGIVE BECAUSE IT IS HEALTHY FOR OUR OWN MIND, BODY AND SPIRIT TO FORGIVE. It's hard to keep hating someone, resenting someone, despising someone without it taking a toll on us. As John Huffman once said, "The world's most miserable person is one who won't forgive. Nothing can gnarl

the soul more quickly. Resentment and hatred are "useless, black feelings." Usually they do more harm to us than the person we resent.

Jesus followed his admonition to Peter with an intriguing story. He said the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. The king forgave his servant who owed him a huge sum. But the servant did not forgive as he had been forgiven. He demanded that someone who owed him a small sum be thrown in jail.

Jesus continually linked forgiveness for our fellow human beings with our forgiveness by God. Jesus purposely used wild exaggeration in this story to make a point: If you and I have been forgiven by God for every sin, every indiscretion, for every stupid thing we have ever done can we not find it in our hearts to forgive others?

As Jesus was being crucified, people stood at the foot of the cross and taunted him. I'm sure the disciples and others wondered why Jesus didn't retaliate. Instead he hung there and took it. Why? Because long ago Jesus knew that God had stopped keeping score.

Let's do some human math. For argument's sake let's assume you commit one sin a day. OK that's 365 sins a year. Multiply that times 80 years. (I'm assuming we'll all live to 85 and we won't count the first 5 years before you started kindergarten and had to learn to relate to strangers) In your lifetime you will have sinned 29,200 times. (and that's of course assuming you are able to limit yourself to 1 sin a day.) That's certainly a lot more than 490.

Those who follow Jesus follow his instructions and follow his example. They forgive those who have done them wrong. Even if it was 16 years ago or 10 years ago or 5 years ago or 3 years ago or 2 days ago.

How many times shall we forgive? Let me ask you, "How many times would you like to be forgiven?" Seven? Seventy times Seven? 29,201?

This morning I want to make a prediction. I will, in all probability, sin. I will hurt someone's feelings. I will insult someone's intelligence. I will forget someone's birthday. I will ignore someone's good suggestion. I will like my own idea better than someone else's. I will Bar B Que someone else's sacred cow. I will mess up. Believe me, I know me. I will need to ask your forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not saying everything is ok and hunky dory. Forgiveness does not let the offender off the hook. Offenders still suffer the consequences of their actions. Forgiveness is about releasing the power the offender has over us. It's a process that can take a long while

Does this mean that I am to let someone keep hurting me time and time again? No. There are wives and husbands who must walk away from an abusive

spouse. There are children who are being abused who must tell someone so they can be taken away from abusive parents. There are even elderly parents who have to break the relationship with children who abuse and take advantage of them. Jesus is not advocating a destructive co-dependency. He is advocating a pro-active policy of forgiving that can take a lot of the hurt out of human relationships.

We are a family. We are a part of the family of God. Families love one another. Families hurt one another. If you don't care ... it doesn't hurt. Why is it we use the best china for strangers and for family we use chinette? Why is it that we are polite to strangers and dump on the ones we love the most? Why is it we find it easier to forgive strangers than those in our family? Can we forgive other families?

I started by talking about recovering from the attacks of 9/11. How many more have died in the 10 years it took to find and carry out vengeance on Osama Bin Laden?

This morning we read about the miracle of the children of Israel being delivered through the Red Sea, but what about the Egyptians? They were still reeling from the loss of every first born child and animal. How did they receive the news that their whole army perished in the Red Sea? That was THEIR 9-11! Are we still experiencing the ripples of the day those chariots and horses and warriors drowned in the Red Sea in our 21st century as we mourn those lost when chariots of fire crashed into the twin towers in New York City?

King Solomon himself wrote in his book of Proverbs, "When the wicked perish there is singing" (11:10), but later remarked, "When your enemy falls, do not rejoice" (24:17).

We have to live with this dichotomy. If we are not happy that evil has been punished, then we do not care enough, but if we are not sad at the loss of life, then our humanity is weakened. Ezekiel 33:11 says "As I live, says God, I do not wish for the death of the wicked, but for the wicked to repent of their way, so that they may live."

Soon after the terrorist attack on 9-11 someone asked author Phillip Yancey, "Where was God at a time like this? Yancey answered with a question of his own, "Where is the church when it hurts? If the church is doing its job – binding wounds, comforting the grieving, offering food to the hungry – I don't think people will wonder so much where God is when it hurts. They'll know where God is: in the presence of his people on earth."

Where was God on September 11, 2001? God was in the same place as when his only begotten sinless Son was brutally whipped, mocked, beaten, and crucified by evil people to become the Lamb of God who takes away the

sins...of the world so that we could be forgiven and so that we could forgive. 70 times 7. 29, 2022 times.

Jesus died for those in the planes that crashed into the Towers and the Pentagon and the field in Pennsylvania. Jesus died for those firefighters and policemen who rushed into the burning buildings. Jesus died for those who survived and with those who didn't. Jesus died for all those who died in these last 16 years and for all who would believe in Him so that WHEN they perish they would NOT perish but have Everlasting LIFE!

Where was God when waters were not parted but overflowed their banks and destroyed the Texas Coast and the Florida Coast and states in between? God was in those who were rescuing folks by jet skis and helicopters and the boats of the local first responders and neighbors and the neighboring Cajun Navy. ... so that only 114 lost their lives in both storms. God has been in and among you as you have lent your hand to help those who were flooded. God will be with those who go today to help Joyce and Jack Pennington rip out wood paneling. God is with us and will be with us in however long it takes to come through our seas. God is with us and will be with us as we wrestle with hurt and resentment and walk through OUR Red Sea walls of hate to the shores of forgiveness.

Jesus died for us. AND Jesus rose to live again and lives for those who live on. Jesus lives in us as we seek to carry on his ministry of reconciliation that involves forgiving and being forgiven as we forgive. Jesus forgives us 29,201 times (IF we are able to limit ourselves to needing forgiveness only once a day.)

When it comes to forgiving, and especially when it comes to being forgiven I prefer $1+1=1$. And $1+1+1=4$ and $29,201+1=4$ given. When it comes to being forgiven I prefer the REALLY Old School Math--God's ... math.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, thank you for forgiving us. We have freely received your grace and so we freely give it to others. We ask that you will give us the strength and resolve to repair what can be repaired, to restore what needs to be restored, and to start over with what cannot. Give us the grace to help one another and to share what we have with those who have less or lost all. May this be an opportunity to grow closer to each other as a church and to you as our Lord and Savior.

Lord we thank you for the examples of courage and strength that arise out of devastating loss. We thank you for those who continue to put themselves in harm's way for our protection. We thank you for first responders, and their service. We thank you for your grace which assures us of our own forgiveness and gives us the grace to forgive others. Most of all we thank you for sending Jesus to be our Savior, to die as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins so that we can live on with you in heaven even after we no longer live here on earth.. Amen.