



“Fantastical Numbers”

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Matthew 18:21-35 (CEV):

²¹ Peter came up to the Lord and asked, “How many times should I forgive someone who does something wrong to me? Is seven times enough?”

²² Jesus answered:

Not just seven times, but seventy times seven!^[b] ²³ This story will show you what the kingdom of heaven is like:

One day a king decided to call in his servants and ask them to give an account of what they owed him. ²⁴ As he was doing this, one servant was brought in who owed him fifty million silver coins. ²⁵ But he didn’t have any money to pay what he owed. The king ordered him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all he owned, in order to pay the debt.

²⁶ The servant got down on his knees and began begging, “Have pity on me, and I will pay you every cent I owe!” ²⁷ The king felt sorry for him and let him go free. He even told the servant that he did not have to pay back the money.

²⁸ As the servant was leaving, he happened to meet another servant, who owed him a hundred silver coins. So he grabbed the man by the throat. He started choking him and said, “Pay me what you owe!”

²⁹ The man got down on his knees and began begging, “Have pity on me, and I will pay you back.” ³⁰ But the first official refused to have pity. Instead, he went and had the other official put in jail until he could pay what he owed.

³¹ When some other servants found out what had happened, they were very distressed for the man who had been put in jail. Then they told the king what had happened. ³² The king called the first servant back in and said, “You’re an evil man! When you begged for mercy, I said you did not have to pay back a cent. ³³ Don’t you think you should show pity to someone else, as I did to you?” ³⁴ The king was so angry that he ordered the servant to be tortured until he could pay back everything he owed. ³⁵ That is how my Father in heaven will treat you, if you don’t forgive each of my followers with all your heart.

Sermon:

If you don't know this about me already, here is the truth... I don't do math. I am intimidated by numbers.

But the numbers in this gospel story are truly fantastical.

If you do the math, Jesus just told Peter to forgive a brother or sister 490 times. Does anybody ever count that high for anything at all, let alone something as weird as counting out each and every moment of forgiveness or reconciliation??? Who would do such a thing? Anybody???

As if that isn't weird enough, Jesus then goes on to tell a story about a king and a servant, and the servant owed that king a fantastic amount of money...an unreal amount of money.

The closest translation from the Greek is a "myriad" amount of money. Jesus actually uses the largest number he could use in this story. No one had created the math for a "billion" yet, I guess. He uses the financial measure of a "talent" which is about 15 years of wages for an average laborer. And Jesus says, that servant (literally, a slave) owed 10,000 of them. So what is the math on that?

That is 150,000 years of labor.
Ridiculous, right?

What most scholars infer from such fantastical numbers, is that Jesus was saying, "He owed the king an impossible amount of money".

He had an unpayable debt. He was trapped.

The real highlight of the story...is the forgiveness of the debt by the king.

Forget the fantastical numbers for a minute.
Look now at what the king does!

He has pity.

He is merciful. He has pity. He feels for the poor servant/slave. And he wipes out the debt entirely. He doesn't calculate how much he has lost in this exchange, he just lets it go.

He forgets about what he is owed.

He chooses to forget what he is owed.
He is merciful and moved to pity.

In fact, our reading ends today with the question, “Don’t you think you should show pity to someone else, as I did to you?”

Well, but... In our day and age it is almost impossible for us to NOT do math...the give and take, the owed, and the paid off, the indebted vs. debt free, something bartered, something exchanged, gain and loss at work in every level. Even when it is a kindness we say, “I am indebted to you for your kindness”.

If you get invited to dinner, you send a thank you card, or you return the invitation...and then, you hope you are “all squared away” and no one “owes” anyone another dinner invitation!

Jesus knew this world well: A world of patronage and power-plays: A world of “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours”, a world of bribes, and buying and selling, keeping tabs, keeping score, losing ground or getting ahead, ...in religious ritual, in social setting, in politics.

I repeat...the highlight of this story is that the debt is forgiven.

In our relationships, Jesus seems to be saying, Mercy is everything.

Mercy is generous. It doesn’t count. It doesn’t keep score.

Whatever you are doing, when you keep score, it is not forgiveness. It is not open hearted. It is not mercy, pity or generosity.

Whatever you do when you let go, and open your heart, and open your hands, and open your wallet and stop keeping score, stop keeping count...no matter how fantastical other people may think it is...what you are doing is God-like.

And in this, there is freedom.

When you or I let go of any sense of being indebted, or being owed, of being wronged and needing revenge...there is great freedom.

Have you ever felt this? Try it some time. Let go of a grudge or a resentment. Set your mind to let it go, just stop carrying it.
Forgive someone, freely.

Or...Let go of a financial stressor. Still the worry. Let go of the need to control, to be in charge, to be safe, or secure through that thing, that fund that account, that retirement plan...let the burden of it go.

You literally feel different in your body...lighter.

This, I believe, is a God-like feeling.

We understand that we are made in the image and likeness of God...so I infer that God knows this feeling. God knows it fully and immensely.

Lightness. Joy. Pity. Mercy. Freedom.

Jesus is telling Peter to feel freedom. To feel Joy in mercy. And lightness in forgiveness. An open heart in pity.

Over and over again, we are bound, trapped, weighed down, burdened, and unhappy.

Over and over again, the gospel stories of Jesus seek to give us freedom, joy, lightness, hope.

Sometimes Jesus' stories are of a healing, of a relationship restored, of a hunger satisfied. Always it is a story of freedom joy, love, compassion, mercy. From God to us, through Jesus.

From Jesus, to us, for each of us, with each other.

Freedom, pity, mercy, and peace.

I will not lie to you and say that this freedom is easily claimed. We cling to our hurts, we nurse our resentments, we are certain of our innocence and another's wrong doing against us.

But these are heavy burdens.

There is freedom in putting them down.

Let go of the fantastical numbers!

Live free. Stop Counting, Jesus says.