

Exodus 12:1-14  
Psalm 149

Romans 13:8-14  
Matthew 18:15-20

In high school both my twin brother and I enjoyed math and did well in it. There are only ten numbers. How hard can it be? Just Ask Bernie Madoff how easy it is. There is not a lot of wiggle room in math. Two and two will always be four and the square root of 81 will always be 9. When you learn the rules, math is very logical. But in answer to Peter's math question, Jesus gives a very absurd answer. The math does not work!

Peter's question to Jesus' was: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive. As many as seven times?" Peter has probably learned from his past mistakes. Peter probably knows that Jesus will set the number high, probably ridiculously high, so Peter shoots even higher. Not once, not twice, not three times, but seven times. When can I write this person off? Seven times. Peter probably thought seven was pretty high. Peter's question was in response to what Jesus had just taught them, the passage we considered last week. That passage gives the church practical instructions as to what we are to do when someone has offended us, when someone has sinned against us. Peter's logical question was, "OK, but how often are we to forgive those who have hurt us?"

Jesus' answer is clear that Peter is not even close. Peter shoots high. Jesus shoots ridiculously high: "Not seven times, but, ...seventy-seven times." Seventy-seven times can also be interpreted seventy times seven, which would be even higher. That is 490, isn't it? Jesus stresses the absurdity of his answer in the parable. A king settles accounts, and one slave owes the king ten thousand talents. A talent was a standard of money. One talent was the equivalent of 16 years of wages for a common laborer. Ten thousand talents is the equivalent 160,000 years of a common laborer's wages. If we

were to be conservative and use the minimum wage of today, we are talking about two and a half billion dollars! There would be no way a slave could owe that much money, even if he tried Bernie Madoff's proven method of how to get rich quick! There is no way a slave could repay that much money. There is no way a king would have allowed a slave to get that far in debt. There would be no way a king would forgive that kind of a debt. It is absurd. This parable is absurd.

God's grace is absurd because there is nothing we can do for our forgiveness. God does not wait around until we earn our forgiveness. We are sinners. Sometime, especially in the Reformed branch of the Christian faith, you will hear such terms as original sin or total depravity. Makes us sound terrible, does it not. The point is not that we cannot do good. We can do good. We have been seeing a lot of good with Hurricane Harvey and Hurricane Irma. People helping each other. People giving. But at the same time, all of us doing good also do bad. The point is not that we cannot do good. The point is that we are not capable of not doing bad. We are always making mistakes. We are always failing God. God does not wait until we earn our forgiveness for God is a God of grace.

God's forgiveness is absurd. God's grace is absurd. God's compassion is absurd. Just as it would be absurd that a king would forgive such a debt, so God's forgiveness, God's grace, God's compassion, is absurd!

The parable goes on with this slave seeing a fellow slave who owed him a hundred denarii. In today's world, that would have been about \$5,000, a drop in the bucket compared to the first slave's debt of two and a half billion. This first slave grabs the fellow slave by the throat and demands payment. The fellow slave begs for more

time. The first slave refuses and throws his fellow slave into prison until he would pay the debt. Those who witnessed this, knowing how the king had been graceful to the first slave, reported it to the king. The king declares, “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I have had mercy on you. The king reneges on his grace and has the first slave thrown into prison. Jesus concludes, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” If we witnessed what this first slave did to his fellow slave, we too may have reported it to the king. But even if we did not report it to the king, we would have looked upon the first slave as an ungrateful, monster, would we not? Does it now follow that those of us who have been granted grace and mercy are expected and required to extend grace and mercy to others—not seven times, not seventy-seven times, but absurdly?

God’s absurd grace makes it possible for us to forgive others. God’s absurd grace makes it possible for us to extend mercy. It isn’t so much that God has forgiven us so we have to forgive others, as it is because God has forgiven us, our response is to forgive others. God’s grace is our motivation! In Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus concluded the Lord’s Prayer: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” Don’t think Jesus was only talking to the Methodists and the Lutherans since they say “trespasses” and Presbyterians say “debtors!” Reported in one church council records in sixteenth-century Switzerland is the account of a man who was asked to repeat the Lord’s Prayer, he pretended he did not know it, because he knew that if he said it, he would have to forgive the merchant who cheated him—and that was something he had no intention of doing!

Before I bring this all to an end, I do need to add there are those situations where forgiveness requires accountability and consequences. We cannot ignore the deep pain of those who have been hurt. Too many times women have gone to pastors seeking advice about their abusive husbands, and pastors telling them they need to forgive their husbands, and return to their abusive relationships. They need to return to honor their marriage vow, for better or for worse. That is not the purpose of this text and we have to be careful, very careful, not to read that into this text! In situations like these, there has to be accountability, there has to be consequences. In situations like these, the church, the community of faith, has a role in recognizing sin, requiring accountability, and demanding consequences.

God's default stance mercy, grace, and compassion. God's grace is so absurd, one might even say it is unfair! But if God wasn't absurd in his mercy, if God was not unfair, would we be forgiven? We are this first slave. The question is, how will we treat our fellow slaves. As recipients of God's absurd, unfair grace, we are to practice mercy toward others, willingly, concretely, and as a communal way of life. There are those who give this a materialistic interpretation, that our mercy and grace extend toward a just social and economic order, even though that too may seem absurd and unfair. It is unfair. But so is God! Perhaps the measure of assurance for our own salvation is not some ecstatic religious experience, but whether or not we too will live out the kind of unfair and absurd grace that has been shown to us by our Redeemer.

At the name of Jesus  
every knee shall bend  
and every tongue confess  
that Christ is Lord  
to the glory of God. Amen.