



September 13, 2020

Sermon – The New Math

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Thank you for bearing with me this summer, in my first year with you, especially this year, it seemed wise to return to our foundational stories. We have followed the lectionary available to all churches of every stripe, and I have tried to follow what previous pastors had done, but actually throughout my ministry what I have preached on has been both the Old Testament and Gospel readings.

School children across the Nation going to school on Video Conference over Computer is just as controversial a change. When I was in Primary School the Board of Education came out with what they described as “The New Math” which were different teaching methods for how to teach Long Division, Algebra and Geometry. Our Scripture lessons today, refer to thinking about numbers differently, trying to shift how we think about God and our world.

Forgiveness is hard for us. Something has been taken that cannot be replaced. Not only the thing, but our sense of violation of self. So where Sin and Violation are among the oldest of human concepts, just as ancient is the difficulty of forgiveness. Simon Peter came to Jesus asking “So I forgave my brother. But he continues to sin against me, how many times do I have to forgive him for the same thing as many as SEVEN TIMES?” And here is where the NEW MATH enters in, according to some translators, Jesus responded not 7 times, but 70 times! Others translate this as 70 times 7 times, others that Jesus’ intent was 70 times 70 times! As many as 4,900 times. Because if we are keeping track of how many times we have forgiven... we have not really ever forgiven, have we?

Jesus goes on to illustrate this with a Parable: A man owes the King an enormous amount that could never be repaid. Translators have struggled to identify meaningful amounts based on 2000 years of inflation, from different cultures, and differing annual salaries; but appreciate what Jesus is saying, translated here as bags of gold, represents years of your personal income and livelihood. It matters not if your annual income is \$40,000 or \$100,000 or 10,000,000; for you, 10 Talents equals 10 years of earnings and 10 years of hard work. Not a sum any of us can envision ever being able to pay off. And the King hears his begging for forgiveness, and the King Listens and the King Cares and forgives him. But the forgiven one goes out into the world and encounters another who owes him, not years but several days earnings. Still a significant debt to be forgiven, but miniscule by comparison, and the forgiven one refuses to forgive! So much in our human reality is based on money, on quantity, on commercial value; Jesus’ New Math is that the numbers really are inconsequential.

Two different things are being said here, both of which are monumental! First that just as we state in the LORD’s Prayer “Forgive us our sins as we have been forgiven”. Every one of us at some point in life has created a debt, be it financial or social, by saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, we each have offended, we have sinned... and we have been forgiven, SO we need to forgive graciously.

Second, any time in a parable that Jesus says a King, a Landowner, the Master, we are talking about God. And God Hears, and God Listens and God Cares and God forgives. Someone commented to me, “I think I am wearing God out with all my praying”... someone else described “I think God has forgotten me here”

another, that “God tired of us.” Pharaoh refused to listen. Pharaoh refused to care. They were only slaves to Pharaoh, possessions. This passage describes that God cares. God listens. God does not ever tire of us or forget us. But sometimes we need to consider changes in our thinking and consideration of the world.

For hundreds of years the Old Testament people had been slaves of Pharaoh. As slaves, you have no control over decision-making, when to eat, how much, what to believe. SUDDENLY, by crossing the Red Sea, they were free. But how do you go from being Slaves/Property/Animals of Burden, out of bondage, to respecting yourself and being respected as Human Beings, a Holy People of God? Oppression is not only about slavery, but how we live and respect one another. Nostalgically, they recalled sitting beside enormous stew pots cooking, which they could smell but never taste. They filled their bellies with smell, but had nothing to sustain life, no meat or bread. So they complained to Moses.

God appointed a multi-layered test! The test is not only whether we can follow direction. Not only if we can elevate human need over wants and desires. The test is whether we can adjust the rhythm of our lives, from working full-out in Rabbit Gear; to dancing with work balanced by appreciation and thanksgiving. Moses reported what God had said, that in the evening immense number of quail would come upon the fields, everyone would have meat. In the morning as the dew lifted there would be Manna upon the ground. The word Manna literally means “What is this stuff?” What manna was we do not know. Some theorize there was a worm that drilled holes in Tamarind fruit, causing a sticky syrup to drizzle, which when dried overnight became like flour. Others that Quail came up, and this was some form of quail residue. What it was is not the point, God gave Moses instruction how much of the Manna to gather. For if you are lazy and do not gather, you will have nothing to eat. If you hoard gathering everything up, it will go bad and be filled with worms. But should you gather enough for your needs, not for your wants which are inexhaustible, but for our needs there would be plenty. Few of us have ever been to the Wilderness, let alone gathered and tasted Manna so what difference does this make for us today? Has there ever been a time when we were afraid of the future? When we hoarded all we could find, regardless of what made sense or what we needed?

Years ago, as part of a Vacation Church School program, we invited the children to gather Chocolate Kisses. If you do not gather any you will not have them. If you gather too many, in this sun and heat they will melt and get wormy.

There is distinction between our wants and our needs. But also, God gifts Moses and Israel with a vital schedule for balance. The point of life is not to work every hour of every day, attempting to accumulate all we can receive. Instead, work hard, but every week, pause for a day of Sabbath. Not a day of sleeping. A day, one day every week, to cease our routine and appreciate the world around us.

The subtle nature of Scripture... Did you pay attention to how this story began? There is a territory between the Oasis of Elim and Mount Sinai, called Sin which has no bearing on the people being sinful, except as a homonym to remind us that we travel through regions of Sin all around us. And what were the people called? They were no longer Pharaoh’s slaves. They were not yet the Nation of Israel and 12 Tribes. For the first time, and the last until they leave the wilderness, the people are identified by God as being “A Great Congregation”. Rarely in American English have I heard description of the verb “To Congregate” until this pandemic, when this was what we were prohibited from doing. Many have described what they long to experience after this isolation is over. To See People. To share a Meal. To go to the Movies. What I long for, what we need most is to congregate, to join together as a communion of caring and prayer and forgiveness. They were in the wilderness forty years. We know not exactly how long, as they tracked months and years differently from today, the point of 40 Days or Years “Quarantine”

was a long time apart. In order that when we re-emerge, we might appreciate life differently. Having lived through weeks of empty shelves from hoarding; having lived through people's fears of participating in life; I pray that we can come together very soon, thankful for life, thankful for the church and community.