

There's No Accounting for Sinners

Matthew 18:21-35

We human beings are compulsive counters . . . we love to count . . . we can't help it . . . we just have to quantify things . . . I was born on the tenth day of the twelve month in the nineteenth hundred and sixty-ninth year of the Gregorian calendar . . . I am one hundred and seventy five centimeters in height, although I would swear I am taller . . . I have a resting pulse of 58 beats per minute. I have one wife and three children. This morning someone will count how many people are sitting in the pews . . . and how much money you give . . . and someone will probably be able to tell me that this sermon went for 14 minutes and 27 seconds.

Counting helps us make sense of our world . . . counting helps us know our place . . . counting gives us a sense of control. But with counting comes comparing and contrasting and ranking and evaluating. Which might be okay if you're the strongest, the fastest, the smartest, the wealthiest . . . but, maybe not so good if you're the smallest . . . the weakest . . . the ugliest. With counting comes competition and standards and expectations and pressure. We can be better . . . and bigger . . . and stronger . . . and smarter . . . so we should be better, and bigger, and stronger, and smarter! And, with that comes the anxiety: am I good enough, pretty enough, rich enough? Finally, with counting comes power . . . the power to judge who's in and who's out . . . to decide who's worthy of being counted. And, if this is power then surely this is how God is and what God does too.

So, as a compulsive counter Peter asks a very natural question of Jesus. "How many times, Lord, should I forgive?" Let's see . . . the rabbis say three times is enough, but let's impress the master . . . let's go for something outlandish . . . how about 7 times . . . yes, the perfect number . . . above and beyond . . . that must count for something! And, isn't that the point of Peter's question? What we do must count for something . . . and, if we can count it then we can control it . . . then we can do our duty . . . then we have the power.

"Good try, Peter," Jesus says, "but it's not seven times but seventy times seven"!

And, did you notice what your brain just did? For the cleverest counters you immediately worked out that seventy times seven is . . . 490 . . . for the rest of us we just thought, "Mmm, that's a lot!" But, we all counted . . . or wanted to . . . because that's what we do.

But, Jesus is not talking about counting. No, what he means is that while that's what we might do in *our* little kingdoms, God's kingdom works completely differently . . . in God's kingdom it's not about counting . . . in God's kingdom there is no counting . . . if you're in God's kingdom you just keep on forgiving . . . that's what God does. And, to ram the point home Jesus tells this crazy little story . . . this completely outlandish and over-the-top story . . .

"So, Peter, you like counting . . . you like to know where you stand . . . well, there's this king, right . . . he's decided to settle his accounts . . . and he discovers one of his servants owes him a gazillion dollars. In the kingdom of counting eventually this king calls him to account. You see, with counting comes

consequences . . . fair enough. But, the servant falls at the king's feet and pleads for mercy" "I'll pay it back . . . I'll pay it back, just give me time". There's no way he's going to be able to pay back what he owes . . . he's never going to earn a gazillion dollars . . . the debt is too great. But, here's the amazing bit . . . the king listened . . . the king had mercy . . . the king had outlandish mercy . . . he canceled the debt and let the man go! Canceled the debt! A gazillion dollars! "I'm not counting any more . . . you're free . . . totally free . . . no obligation . . . no requirements . . . no repayments . . . your debt is forgiven a gazillion times and more".

Come on . . . this doesn't happen in the real world!

It's a crazy story, but that's how it works in God's kingdom: there is no more counting up . . . or, calculating . . . or, tallying . . . or, ranking. Whatever debt we had has been forgiven . . . completely . . . totally . . . utterly forgiven.

How must have that servant felt? He's free! He's just been given the most amazing, undeserved, unexpected gift! He's been given his life back! He's on top of the world, surely! And, so the next bit in the story is the most outlandish of all . . . having just had this unpayable debt canceled the servant goes out and seeks out . . . he actually seeks out one of his own debtors and demands payment of a few dollars! Come on, who would do that? Doesn't he 'get it'? That's like you or I, baptized, forgiven children of God holding on to a grudge in our heart . . . or sharing a juicy bit of gossip because it gives us power. Those sort of things don't happen . . . do they?

Except they do . . . all the time! Don't we get it? Before God our unpayable debt has been canceled . . . our slate wiped clean . . . the most amazing, undeserved gift given to us . . . God has given up counting . . . we are free from obligation, from expectation . . . from recriminations. We have life in God's kingdom . . . that is a kingdom where there is no greatest, fastest, smartest, weakest, ugliest . . . a space that is free of the voices of criticism and condemnation . . . our own voice and that of others . . . a kingdom where we don't have to look over our shoulder, or climb the ladder . . . a kingdom where we are free to be who we are. That's God's gift to us . . . and, yet, we walk from here and immediately start counting again . . . and tallying . . . and judging . . . and criticizing . . . and condemning . . . and begrudging . . . and treating forgiveness as a formula. We walk right back into our little kingdoms . . . where we ourselves are judged and measured and counted and discounted . . . as is the way of the world . . . committing all sorts of sins against each other and against God . . . which puts us right back where we began: in debt . . . unpayable debt.

And, *that* brings us back to a crazy little story about God's kingdom and about God's outlandish forgiveness . . . God's over-the-top wiping of the debt for ingrained, compulsive counters like us. Hear it again . . . and again . . . and again . . . take it to heart . . . and, one day we might 'get it' . . . one day we'll stop counting and start living . . . in God's kingdom . . . maybe today's that day?

Amen.

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