

16th Sunday After Pentecost (3 Lent A)

Matthew 18.21-35

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Beyond Keeping Score

I think today's Gospel reading presents a contrast between a theology of grace and a theology of keeping score. The first is the one Jesus mostly adopts. The second is the one Peter pushes and the one our world has bought into.

Anne Herbert wrote *Random Kindness and Senseless Acts of Beauty*. Herbert's book suggested the whole thing started in Eden when Adam and Eve began keeping score. It carried on in their children; Cain's anger over Abel's higher *giving* score led to murder.

It seems, God got so angry with Adam and Eve for worrying about their scores or who had the biggest or best that God kicked them out of Eden. Of course, the serpent taught them to keep score in the first place. Herbert wrote, "Really, it was life in Eden that didn't mean anything. Fun is great in its place, but without scoring there's no reason for it... We were lucky to get out. We're all very grateful to the snake."

So, who's keeping score? Almost everybody. Ask a coach of any sport you name. Ask the members of Telstra Premiership Rugby. The Dolphins and the Warriors had a big game yesterday—second and third place teams. The Dolphins won 26-16 from third place. There was respect shown afterwards from both sides.

But, do you expect any Warrior from New Zealand to say, "Oh we had a wonderful time. After all, it's not whether you win or lose; it's how you play the game that counts?" The Warriors façades show otherwise. Or ask the head of a business. "Oh, we're just having fun here. It doesn't matter whether we make money."

Forgiveness isn't always easy. One friend reminded me about the book about the forgiveness of some Amish. It goes back to Oct. 2006 where a man gunned down ten girls at an Amish school, killing five.

The story caught the attention of people around the world. Then came the report that within like a week Amish parents brought words of **forgiveness** to the family of the one who had slain their children. The outside world was incredulous that such forgiveness could be offered so quickly. Forgiveness eclipsed the tragic story.

Some say God isn't really laissez-faire. Surely God is more stoic. They say give us a puritanical God who cares when we are sinful, a God who cares how we act, and shows us that actions have consequences.

If God doesn't keep score, what difference does it make what we do? Jesus leaves us hanging. Which is it, free grace — or is there more bite to the parable? Some accountability to the whole thing?

Recall today's gospel story. The king summons debtors. One owes like \$60 billion. The king, at the man's plea, tears up the debt and sends him away. That same servant goes and roughs up a fellow who owes him \$600 and throws him in prison. The king finds out, throws the first guy in prison, and throws away the key.

Then comes the kicker. Jesus says, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Now how do we reconcile mercy and justice? A powerful and helpful model is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa. It offered forgiveness **and** stating and accepting responsibility for wrongful and wounding conduct.

What's the deal here? Has Jesus gone *hardhearted* on us? Does this mean if I don't forgive from the heart, God doesn't forgive me? Recall the words, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."?

Rev. Paul Rorem put it this way. "Few people think that God is an old man with a white beard on a throne, but some think he acts that way. As if God is up in heaven, looking down for unforgiving attitudes. 'Aha! There's another. Mark that one down, Gabriel, no forgiveness for John down there.'"

Is that the way it works? Consider gravity. If you do something like stepping off a cliff, God doesn't say, "I'm going to punish that person with a fall." It's not some *special* act of divine retribution God zaps one with. No, the nature of the *created order* ties together the cause and effect.

No one is keeping score on grace. Peter had trouble catching on. *He* still wanted to keep score.

Okay, he'd learned that forgiveness *must* replace revenge. Yet he was still asking about limits. Peter's rabbis had said, "Three offenses and that's it." Forgive a person once, twice, even three times, but anything beyond that is foolish. How many chances can you give a person? Peter, wanting to be generous, said, "Seven? How about seven Jesus?" Jesus said, "No, seventy-seven times."

I think we will miss the point if we do math sums. Jesus says, "Do it in your hearts." Why? Because forgiveness is always *beyond* calculation.

If God kept score on us, we'd have lost long ago. Greek scholars debate whether he said seventy times seven or seventy-seven times. **Does it matter?** I would have lost count forgiving seventy-seven times, wouldn't you? Either way, the extravagance is Jesus' point. It's God's extravagance.

God did *our* math when Jesus died on a cross. We find the unmerited forgiveness of a God who does **not** keep score on us. God gives us not only second and third chances but a never-ending string of them.

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God is like a mother who will never, ever give up on us; a father who loves us when we don't feel very lovable anymore.

It's a love that's hard to accept, especially when one doesn't have much love to start with.

God's love surprises us, like an unexpected birthday party. It comes as a \$60 billion gift when we have no way to repay it. All we can do is receive it graciously and thank God by showing that we understand what such love means.

What it means, of course, is no more keeping score with friends or family or even our enemies. It means no limit on our forgiveness, not saying, "I'm sorry but I can never forgive him for that." Or forgiveness is just too good for her."

Yes, forgiveness can be tough. When we learn forgiveness, it loosens us, and we begin to share it with others. One's not so uptight about life, because we're not keeping score on what others have done to us. Even those who are dead and gone. Think about that person in *your* life who has hurt you the most. Each of us has at least one. Now, let it go into God's hands.

Two things are true about our lives, they are irreversible and they are short. So, we do what we can with what we have—to make our peace with God, ourselves and those around us. If God has stopped keeping score on us, why are we keeping score on those around us?

Let us pray:

Jesus, you taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." These place a claim on us. Help us seek to meet that goal. When we forget your mercy and grace as models for dealing with others, hold the cross before us. Help us to give up grudges and strengthen our love for each other in Jesus' name. Amen.