

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost -Proper 19 Year A-The Rev. Jennifer B.
Cleveland 9.17.23

Exodus 14:19-31, Psalm 114, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

Up until today, the big biblical number has been forty. The rains that Noah and all those on the ark endured lasted for forty days and forty nights. The length of time they waited for the waters to recede also lasted forty days and forty nights. After the Israelites escape from Egypt, they are headed into forty years of wandering in the Wilderness. The Wilderness is also where Jesus fasted there for forty days and forty nights. And so on. Whenever something lasted for a really, really, really, really long period of time, or when anyone wanted to throw out the biggest number possible, number forty was it. So when we get to Peter's question in the gospel—"How often do I forgive my brother or sister? Seven times?"—Jesus blows that number not just a little out of the water, but way out, far beyond anything imaginable. Not just seven times, which, when it comes to forgiveness, is already (let's face it) a very generous number. Not just forty times, or many, many, many, many, many times, but seventy-seven times. If forty is the scriptural equivalent of a googol—a 1 followed by 100 zeroes—Jesus suggests the equivalent of a googolplex when it comes to forgiveness: a 1 followed by a googol of zeroes. All of a sudden we are in the middle of yet another lesson in Kingdom Math.

As a reminder, Kingdom Math does not follow the normal computational rules of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. The normal computational rules tell us that the numbers need to add up on both sides of the equation. If this is what you borrowed, then that's what you owe back. If this is what you did, then that is what you deserve. Kingdom Math does not follow any of those rules and even though we know the conceptual foundations of Kingdom Math (Love God and your neighbor; seek justice, show kindness, walk humbly with God; If you share a few loaves of bread and some fish, expect to not only feed everyone, but there will be an abundance of leftovers), Kingdom Math constantly pushes at the limits of what we understand or imagine about ourselves, others, and the ways of Love. It constantly pushes us to go bigger, to expand the outer edges of our imagination.

But what about this parable today, you might say? From our vantage point, it might be hard to wade through the language of slaves and wickedness and torture. Rather than make you think big, it might have the opposite effect and feel just a little bit small. Part of grappling with the concepts of Kingdom Math means paying attention to all that comes up in particular parables or gospels or reading—all the action, all the questions, all the language. The *but what about*s—as in *but what about* that language and the stern tone of punishment?—can push us to dig deeper into what we really believe, what we really practice when it comes to forgiveness and mercy. The *but what about*s push at us to grapple with the ways our understanding of the outpouring of compassion that is at the heart of Kingdom Math might be ready to expand.

While we might not use the language of this parable, hierarchies and understandings of who is deserving of forgiveness and mercy and what can and cannot be forgiven are alive and well. Richard Holloway, in his brilliant short book, *On Forgiveness*, reflects on two meanings of this parable: the first is that it seems to promote a *doctrine of*

conditional forgiveness—only if we forgive others can we ourselves be forgiven. But, he suggests, the parable might have a deeper meaning that *once we stray into the web of revenge, it wraps itself around us forever, trapping us in the compulsions of vengeance and victimhood.* He imagines Jesus saying, in part, “Don’t let the imperative of revenge steal your future from you...You’ll just get sucked into a quagmire [that you might never get out of.] (Richard Holloway, *On Forgiveness*, pp 72-75).

Getting bogged down and stuck in a quagmire is exactly what happens in Exodus with the Egyptian chariots, where Kingdom Math is also at work. Where today, finally, we reach the crescendo in the action; the climax that the narrative has been building towards; this moment of intensity and tension that has been remembered and celebrated over hundreds of thousands of years, when the Israelites actually make it out of Egypt; this is the part that is so central that it is always read at the Easter Vigil. Where is the Kingdom Math, you might ask? The Kingdom Math is subtle, so subtle that it is hardly noticeable. The people are running for their lives and there is this very slight movement, almost imperceptible: the angel and cloud leading the way slip to the rear. It is immediately clear that God didn’t just favor the leaders, the strongest and the fastest, and all those in front who were going to make it out, if anyone could. One minute, the angel and the cloud are out front, leading the Israelite army and the next minute, they are with those in the back, slowing down, waiting, accompanying, making sure no one is left in the dust (or, more accurately, in the sand). To move to the rear, to keep everyone together, to shine light on all of them would have been something completely new and different. This inclusive message that God values all of the Israelites is so central to the Exodus. No one is expendable in Kingdom Math.

But what about the Egyptians? I still remember the moment when a fourteen-year old came up to me directly after a service that included this reading and asked that question. Another *but what about...?* It disturbed her, she said, that they drowned. That God saved the Israelites, but no one seemed to mourn the Egyptians. *But what about the Egyptians?* isn’t a question that the narrative concerns itself with, but it *is* a Kingdom Math question. Her question was about the Egyptians, but it was really about how, even now, our understanding of God and the Community of Heaven might be ready to be expanded. Who are those who we tend to consider expendable or less worthy of full freedom? Who is *the other*, the one or many outside of our warm circle of compassion? Who is left out, even now?

Questions about forgiveness and mercy are not resolved in an instant or even a lifetime, and Jesus’s Kingdom Math lesson even seems to extend wisdom on that front, too. The number forty symbolized a generation, so the number seventy-seven has something to do with extending mercy beyond just one generation. If trauma is passed down from generation to generation, what would happen if healing and forgiveness were passed down from generation to generation? Kingdom Math might grow, exponentially, like compound interest.

Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the Jewish new year and the start to the High Holy days, began on Friday night and ends tonight. (Yom Kippur begins a week from tonight.) On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, there is a simple ritual of forgiveness, *Tashlich*, that

many people participate in. Tashlich in Hebrew means *cast off* or *throw away* and the ritual entails going to a flowing body of water with a fist- or pocketful of crumbs, reflecting quietly on mistakes of the past year and then throwing the bread crumbs into the water. The bread crumbs represent all those ways the thrower has hurt others, carried grudges, or been stuck with a hard heart. The flowing water carries the crumbs away. Year after year, rushing stream after rushing stream, it is freeing to throw the crumbs into the water and watch them disappear, quickly submerged in the water, or washed away. No one counts up the number of crumbs in their own pocket and they don't know how many crumbs are in anyone else's pocket. 7, 40, 77, hundreds, more. All the crumbs are cast in, together, indistinguishable. And they all disappear. This, too, is Kingdom Math at work.

I humbly offer these math meditations. Will this be our last lesson in Kingdom Math? I haven't looked at the math lessons ahead, but probably not.