

Matthew 18. 21-35

A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church

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### **Countless Grace**

Venus and Serena Williams were born to play tennis, literally. Before they were born, back in 1979, their father, who already had three daughters, told his wife they had to have two more daughters and teach them to play tennis. Why? Because that year Mr. Williams saw the winner of the Women's U.S. Open claim a prize of \$48,000, compared to the \$52,000 annual salary he was earning.

As one sportswriter put it in a story about the Williams family, "He did the math," along with a whole lot of coaching and instruction for little Venus and Serena as time marched on. Needless to say, in the ensuing years, the daughters' paychecks eclipsed those of the their dad.

On another sports note -- doing the math -- the New York Yankees have the largest payroll of all major league baseball teams, totaling \$209 million. With 30 players, that's an average of 6-7 million per player. The top-paid Yankee makes more than all of the players on the Florida Marlins team combined.

While I was listening to sports talk radio recently -- which I love to do on occasion, along with NPR and Rush Limbaugh (I try to get the full spectrum) -- I was struck by a phone call to the sports-talk radio station WFAN from a die-hard, heartbroken, Yankees fan. It Mario from Queens. Mario called into to complain about the annual salary of that top-paid Yankee -- Alex Rodriguez who makes \$28 million per year -- and then went on to say: "Go ahead. Do the math. For all that money, there's no way the Yankees should be in 4<sup>th</sup> place . . . and behind a team from Canada! the Blue Jays! Go figure! It's unforgiveable!"

In this Lord's Day passage from the Gospel of Matthew Peter the Apostle is "doing the math" as it were, with his questions about forgiveness.

Peter comes to Jesus, with a certain expressed concern about forgiveness. Peter is calculating. Or, he is on the verge of calculating . . . his response to whomever has hurt or wronged him. He approaches Jesus with a certain air as he asks this question: "If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

As if to say, "Let's do the math on this one" . . .

The rabbinical teaching of the day said that when someone wronged you, you should forgive up to three times, and then you could stop forgiving. (We see this threefold approach to forgiveness in present Jewish experience of Atonement on Yom Kippur.) So, to be on the safe side -- or maybe the pious side -- Peter doubles that and adds one more to be magnanimous. So how about I forgive them seven times? That should make the math come out right, shouldn't it?

Jesus responds to Peter's mental calculus by answering with math of his own. He says, "not seven times. But seven times seventy . . ." The literal Greek here can be translated as either seventy seven or seven times seventy, which would be 490. The point being not to keep track of offenses, but to simply forgive, to be about grace . . . countless grace.

With that, he presents the parable of the unforgiving servant. [Once again – as throughout the Gospels -- Jesus tells a parable to defy any equations or statutes or calculations of the religious law and doctrine.] In the parable, there is a king who attempts to settle accounts with his servants. He comes across one whose account is short “ten thousand talents.” That’s big.

A talent was a monetary unit. It was a large and significant unit. Further down the scale were shekels and dinarii. A talent could be more than a couple years income for the average servant. The servant in the parable owes a huge sum – ten thousand talents, is how the passage reads. And the king forgives that servant, totally.

Then, that same servant went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a small amount – hundred denarii. And grabbed him by the throat – saying “pay me what you owe me.” The servant could not, and was thrown into prison to work off the debt.

As Jesus tells the parable, the king upon hearing of this was enraged. He withdrew his debt-relief and ordered the servant off to be punished, severely. This all is harsh. But, this is parable . . . not allegory . . . so we are not meant to press for details that correspond to specifics, but to see our forgiveness by God shaping our forgiveness of others. God is not doing the math, somehow calculating grace, so why should we . . .

Ernest Hemingway tells the story – in *Farewell to Arms* – about a young man who wrongs his father and he runs away from home to the city of Madrid. Out of great love for his son, the father takes out an ad in the Madrid newspaper. The ad reads: “Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana, 12 noon on Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa.” Now, Paco is a rather common name in Spain. So when the father gets to the hotel, he finds 800 men waiting for their fathers. “

There is, in us, a longing for forgiveness, to receive it and need to give it. It is the Christian’s calling, on this day when we gather around the sacrament – the cup poured out for the forgiveness of sins . . . and praying “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

One night, in 1935, Fiorello LaGuardia, Mayor of New York, sat in as judge of a night court in poor section of the city. A case come up where a grandmother had been arrested for stealing food from a grocery store to feed her grandchildren. From the bench, LaGuardia told her: “You are guilty. I have to punish you. Ten dollars or ten days in jail.”

With that, La Guardia pulled out a 10 dollar bill from his pocket and put it into a hat. And then he proceeded to fine everybody in the courtroom for living in a city where grandmothers have to steal food to feed their grandchildren. They passed around the hat and that woman left the courthouse that night . . . not only with her fine totally paid, but with 47 dollars and 50 cents in her pocket.

How much more likely is it, that woman – along with those present -- left the courtroom in a spirit of forgiveness, with a greater inclination to show mercy to those she met? It happens to us . . . You and I are going to be wronged, treated with less-than-grace. And also, we can be -- and are -- on the giving end of that equation as well. Some will come asking for forgiveness, some not – it may not even be on their radar. So we are confronted with the choice. Are we going to seize on the pain and the pride and withhold forgiveness . . . and be left – like the servant – in “prison.” That is, in the grip of anger or depression, or guilt and resentment and revenge . . . or be free, by forgiving?

Anne Lamont, the wonderful writer whom we've read on retreats here at LAC, discovers that freedom of forgiveness, as she tells it in an essay in her book, *Travelling Mercies* . . . Anne said at first that she was not one of those Christians that is heavily into forgiveness—that she was one of the other kind. (that is to say, holding on to what we harbor, and withholding any grace to others who have hurt or disappointed directly or indirectly).

“They say we are not punished for the sin, but by the sin, and I began to feel punished by my unwillingness to forgive . . .,” she writes, “By the time I decided to become one of the ones [heavily] into forgiveness, it was like trying to become a marathon runner in middle age; everything inside me either recoiled, as from a hot flame, or laughed a little too hysterically. I tried to will myself into forgiving various people who harmed me directly or indirectly over the years – certain US presidents, three relatives, two old boyfriends, and one teacher in a pear tree – it was like “The Twelve days of Christmas” meets *Taxi Driver*. But in the end, I could only pretend that I had . . . [forgiven].

I decided that I was starting off with my sights too high. [or – might I add -- could it be doing the math on my terms?]. As C.S. Lewis said in *Mere Christianity*, “If we really want to learn how to forgive, perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo.”<sup>1</sup>

So she decided to put all of those people and things she'd been harboring and festering on hold, and in her words “start with some whom I barely knew whom I hated for only a while.”

It worked, as she came to let go of what she had held against that person, and somethings she held on to – even her own self-confessed self-contempt. It's work. It's important. Someone said (Elizabeth O'Connor) “Forgiveness is a whole lot harder than any sermon makes it out to be.”

Whether it's from long ago – something held on to and harbored. Or close-up and recent and freshly injected, there is something we need – you and I -- forgiveness for . . . and there is forgiveness we need to give. Think . . . what that must be for you, and to whom, and for what? Go ahead, forgiven that you are, be forgiving.

Finally, always: What is God for, but for giving . . . forgiveness and countless grace?! Always. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts On Faith*, Pantheon, New York, 1999, p. 128.