

21 February 2021

Giving Up for Lent . . . Scorekeeping Matthew 18:21-35

Our scripture today comes from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 18, verses 21-35:

²¹Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ ²²Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

²³‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, “Pay what you owe.” ²⁹Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?” ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.’

An article from a recent scientific journal:

Sequestered in a private booth at a Pasadena-area Cheesecake Factory for nearly 25 minutes, a party of eight California Institute Of Technology physicists emerged exhausted but visibly excited Friday evening after successfully splitting the bill.

All right, it was actually from *The Onion*, but have you ever had that experience? Trying to split the bill in a large group of people who don’t all know each other well? It feels as if it would require a rocket scientist “But I didn’t have any of the appetizer! I don’t see why I should pay for . . .” “Look, I only had a salad! Camden ate twice as much as I did!” Usually it isn’t even about the money. It’s about fairness: a sense of numerical justice, right? Where else do we see the need for numerical justice come into play?

Roommates. How do you split the rent and bills? What about cleaning supplies for the bathroom. What about groceries? (I remember when my son William spent six months sharing an apartment in La Crosse while he did his student teaching. He told me that he and Alex gave up the accounting and just ended up just buying their own groceries, except that they shared the cost of a few staples, like bacon.) What about Christmas presents? Have you ever mentally calculated the cost of the present that your friend gave you, then subtracted the cost of the gift you gave her to determine how much you’re still in her debt? Have you ever privately cursed that person who insists on bringing the expensive gift to the office party, even though the ten dollar limit was

clearly stated? “Oh, I got it on sale.” Right. Christmas cards. So here’s my question: Is it all right to discontinue sending a card to your college friend after only one year of not getting one from him, or do you have to wait for a two-year silence? Office relationships. Ah, numerical justice is often important there, isn’t it? Who calls in sick most often, who takes the most breaks, who takes the longest breaks, and does the smoker who takes periodic breaks during the day actually get the fifteen-minute break mandated by OSHA guidelines. Numerical justice. We’re watching you. We’re keeping score.

And then, of course, there’s marital score-keeping. Who does dishes more often, who puts out new toilet paper, who puts gas in the car, whose turn it is to stay up to pick up the daughter who’s on the volleyball team and whose bus won’t get back from the tournament in Madison until midnight. And who spends the most money. Keeping score very often involves money. It’s so darn countable. I hope that marital score-keeping is not a habitual practice for any of you, but I guarantee that in every marriage it happens sometimes. After all, we all value justice. And sometimes, our value for justice expresses itself numerically.

Most of us, though, have an intuitive sense that score-keeping is somehow unhealthy. Here’s why. First, because when we’re keeping score, we’re generally acting out of duty alone, not out of friendship or compassion or good will. Score-keepers are generally trying to do only what they absolutely have to, the minimum that they can get by with. Do I have to send a Christmas card to Sharon? I friended her on Facebook this year. Isn’t that enough? Second, we keep score when our primary concern is for ourselves, not for others, and certainly not for the group. Score-keeping is about competition, not collaboration. It protects ourselves, making sure no one takes advantage of us. We see this when we’re watching our co-workers’ minutes and counting their personal days. We see this when we’re keeping track of our spouse’s contribution to the household chores.

But most of all, we keep score when we don’t trust. We measure in terms of quantity when we don’t know enough to measure in terms of quality and essence. We protect ourselves when we aren’t sure we’re safe. We resort to numerical justice when we suspect that we might be taken advantage of by someone we don’t know well enough to give the benefit of the doubt. So we start keeping count in order to verify and document our suspicions. 1 John says that perfect love casts out fear; my corollary today says that perfect trust casts out score-keeping. This is why I hope our episodes of marital score-keeping, inevitable though they may be, are rare and brief in duration.

This leads me to our scripture from Matthew. Now this passage is normally used in sermons on forgiveness, but I want to look at it a little differently today. Peter’s question is all about score-keeping. “How many times do I have to forgive my brother? As many as seven?” Now we don’t know if “brother” here is used in a generic sense for another follower of Christ or if Peter’s talking about his literal brother Andrew. So let’s say it was Andrew. Brothers *can* get on your last nerve. Was Andrew one of those irritating people who thought it was just a riot to step on the back of someone else’s sandals while they were walking? Did he love telling embarrassing family stories to strangers? (“To this day Mom sometimes calls him itchy pants!”) If so, I can see Peter’s wondering when he can stop being forbearing, or to put it bluntly, how many times does he have to let it go before he can deck Andrew? And Jesus doesn’t argue. He doesn’t give a pious speech about how the quality of mercy is not strained. Instead, he pretends to take Peter seriously. “Well, you’re right. You need to keep count of Andrew’s transgressions,

but seven's setting the bar a little low, don't you think? Let's say seventy-seven. When Andrew gets to seventy-six, come back and check with me. Bring your records with you; I'll need documentation. You'll want a notebook and a pencil, I think. Probably best to keep a nightly total, wouldn't you say?" And suddenly score-keeping sounds a little silly.

Then Jesus moves into a parable. A king is balancing his accounts – score-keeping – and finds a subject who owes him a great deal. Now the law of the time said that the king had the right to imprison the whole family, even sell them as slaves, to recover his debt. But when the subject pleads for mercy, the king forgives it outright. But then, when the king hears that that subject is keeping minute count of a tiny debt that someone else owes him, the king explodes in anger. Jesus clearly means the king to represent God, so the parable says three things: (1) if God's keeping score, then we're in deep trouble, (2) God is not keeping score, (3) so neither should we.

So this is my challenge for you this week. Notice when you keep score, when you find yourself looking for numerical justice. Who do you resent because they *owe* you? Then . . . stop it. But it won't be easy. Here's what not keeping score will mean. It will mean that sometimes we will be taken advantage of by others, people who *are* keeping score a love being ahead. It means that we will not be able to document before impartial judges how bad others are, or how much better we are than they. And it means, perhaps, eventually, with practice that we'll stop measuring ourselves against those other people to begin with. It means we'll be that one tiny step more like God.

This Lenten season we are thinking together about Personal Growth. In my sermons for the next month, I'll be talking about things we could all stand to give up. Not like giving up coffee or bacon for 40 days – you have to maintain the staple foods, after all – but things that we would be better off giving up permanently. Not huge things. I'm not going to stand up here and call on everyone to give up to give up Anger. That'd just make you mad. But there are smaller steps. So I'm aiming at more manageable goals. Like putting aside the calculator in our relationships. We could do that.