

We don't often talk about numbers when we study the Bible, but I don't think that's so much because numbers don't matter as because most priests are bad at math. And a lot of priests are also uncomfortable talking about numbers like Sunday attendance and the budget, especially when those numbers aren't what we want them to be, or make us feel bad. But the clergy are hardly the only ones who have to contend with difficult numbers. Most people have some anxiety related to numbers, whether they are numbers that represent age, finances, relationships, distances, or most heart-pounding of all, sports scores. When anyone is confronted with numbers that disappoint, frustrate, overwhelm, or scare us, human nature often leads us to ignore them, and sometimes we try to convince ourselves that the troubling numbers aren't important. But the Biblical authors didn't shy away from numbers. Once you start looking for them, numbers in the Bible start jumping out all over the place. Did you know there's even an entire Book of Numbers in there? But Biblical numbers don't stay confined to a book. Those pesky numbers run all over the place, and often they cause trouble.

For instance, when Peter wants to set a limit on the forgiveness Jesus had just described, something sensible, though seemingly high, but Jesus pushes back. Some translations have Jesus saying 77 times, while others have "seventy times seven," which works out to... carry the one... 490. Either way, Jesus's answer is a number, but one that's not so much about measuring a quantity as it is about blowing Peter's mind, in order to change his sense of scale, and renew his humility. And in case that number isn't enough, Jesus does him one better.

I'll spare you my calculations, but the amount of money the king in that parable had loaned worked out to, very roughly, five billion dollars. That's an amount of money none of us will ever see — but if you do, remember to give \$500 million to Advent! Now, sums of that size, and even larger, are part of our world. A few individuals have over \$50 billion dollars, and the Federal government's budget and debt numbers reach the trillions. But in the Biblical world, there might not have been five billion dollars all put together. Maybe a whole kingdom of legendary wealth, like Egypt or Babylon, could have been worth that much at its peak. Such an amount would have been astonishing in itself, but the notion that a king would have lent so much to anyone, much less a slave, or a servant — the word could be translated either way — would have been truly mind-blowing. We are now in territory that inspires the phrase, "more money than God."

Jesus seems to use this number to emphasize that the amount is far beyond hope of repayment, and more importantly, to drive home the message of how much the servant — that is, each of us — has been given, and forgiven. Unfortunately, the first servant doesn't seem to have anything to show for his king's enormous show of grace. He still felt like he had to call in a much smaller loan, maybe \$10,000. And even though an individual could plausibly, in time, repay that amount, the first servant shows no patience, and no grace. The opposite of grace, really, because he has his peer locked

up when he didn't have to. It sounds like a power trip. And those usually end badly.

The point of the story is not the numbers, but they do support the point, which is that forgiveness is really, really important to God, and God is actively involved in both forgiving us and encouraging us to forgive others. So, I interpret the king's financial generosity as a metaphor for how much God loves us. Only love would prompt someone to make such a terrible financial decision. And God wants us to love one another as God has loved us, even though our love is on a much smaller scale. Our decisions might seem tiny compared to God, but God does care about them. You might have heard part of the Lord's Prayer translated as "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," and that is a literal translation. The same Greek words appear in this story.

Most sermons I've heard on this passage stop right around there. But I realized that this parable is part of a pattern. Jesus often teaches directly about economic justice and individual financial decisions. But when he is trying to describe the Kingdom of God, the images and metaphors he chooses often have something to do with money. Think about it: the parable of the talents, the dishonest manager, the widow's mite, paying equal wages for unequal hours of work, and of course, the prodigal son. For a preacher whose message is love, Jesus talks an awful lot about money. Yet, if Jesus was trying to get rich, he failed spectacularly. So why, then? I've got a theory.

I remember going to a Stewardship Training Meeting. Any of those words alone makes eyes start to glaze over, but just saying them all together almost made me pass out from boredom. But at this one, there was a moment that literally got my heart racing. One of the presenters asked us to put our hands over our hearts, and then started asking us specific questions about money — our money. And sure enough, our hearts started pounding. And I think that's what Jesus was doing.

Other topics might seem more titillating, but if Jesus drew his metaphors from, say, the language of adultery, most people — I would hope — would react, "I would never do that! Good thing this story doesn't concern me." Others might say, "Um... that ship has sailed," and there too, the listener has a reason to dismiss the story. But, rich or poor, money matters to everyone, all the time, so Jesus's teachings about the Kingdom of God connect on a visceral level that reflects their importance and makes us remember them.

The very thought of money makes our hearts pound, and though our instinct may be to hoard and demand, Jesus shows us a better way. We can choose to be generous with our money, and with our forgiveness. When we fall short, we can try again. And when we get them right, we find that God's way is liberating. Dealing graciously with our neighbors makes us look good, and feel good, calms our anxious hearts, lets us get on with our lives and sleep at night. That's the way God made us to work.

Even when our forgiveness reaches its limits, we should remember that we have options besides condemning the one we should forgive, and thereby bringing condemnation upon ourselves. We can remember, as St. Paul points out, that the most

important relationship we have is with God, not with the person we can't forgive. Therefore, we can ask God to forgive even our inability to forgive, we can pray for the strength to deal graciously with our neighbors and ourselves, and we can pray that both they and us might grow ever more into the people God intends for us to be. And we can praise God for *not* being like us, but rather forgiving and blessing beyond all measure, beyond all counting.

The same God who gives us our daily bread, gives life itself, intends forgiveness to be ongoing, no less a regular part of life than eating. God's grace and mercy are constant, so rather than trying to make God out to be no better than we are, we should try to be more like God, even though we know we will never measure up to that goal. God's grace and mercy are infinite and overwhelming, but numbers still matter to God. The Bible is full of numbers, and it's only a starting point. God cares about the choices we make every day. What kind of numbers are you putting on the board?