

*"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."
from **Prayers We Have in Common** (1970)*

Back in the day, I took my share of higher math courses. I was on relatively firm footing when it came to algebra and geometry. When I entered the land of trigonometry and calculus and elementary functions, I came to realize that I was a stranger in a strange land. But I suspect I was no more unsettled there than Peter when Jesus taught the higher math of forgiveness.

What is striking at first about that teaching is the mathematical formula Jesus provides for Peter's "how often should I forgive?" The formula can be translated two ways: seventy-seven times or seventy-times-seven. That does **not** imply that on the 78th or 491st time, Jesus frees us to whop somebody on the side of the head. "7" is a number connoting perfection or completion. The higher math of Jesus' "formula" seeks forgiveness that goes beyond what seems the maximum.

But an even more demanding element to Jesus' higher math of forgiveness is in the parable that follows. A servant incurs an impossible debt to a king. Why impossible? The debt is 10,000 talents. The daily wage of such a servant was one denarii a day. 5000 denarii equaled one talent. Thus, 10,000 talents equaled the wages of 50 *million* work days. To repay this debt, the servant would need to work 7 days a week, 365 days a year, for 136,892 years. That assumes no interest.

It is an absurd debt. The absurdity only multiplies when the servant promises to repay it. Then, amazingly, graciously, the monarch cancels the debt. No generous repayment plan here. Cancels it. But the absurdity takes a dark turn. The forgiven servant himself has a debtor who owes an amount 500,000 times smaller than his own had been. The forgiven servant tosses him in prison.

Jesus' higher math of forgiveness as practiced grace comes revealed in the king's response to this outrage. "Should you not have had mercy . . . as I had mercy on you?" The parable's words echo Jesus' own earlier in Matthew: "*Forgive us our sins, **as we forgive those** who sin against us.*" These words with which Jesus taught the practice of prayer are the parable's climactic word for the practice of forgiving. A practice grounded in God's grace toward us.

For Reflection and Action:

*Imagine yourself standing there with Peter. What would you ask Jesus **after** this parable; why?
How does forgiveness balance forgetting and remembering: in the parable; in your life?
How does/might this parable shape the Church's life: in liturgy; in service; in ?*