

Back to School: Math-odist
A Sermon by Pastor Harlen Rife

Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

September 13, 2026

It's back-to-school season! I realize that for many of the families here with school-aged children, we've been back to school for several weeks, but it's still a time of settling in to the new year. In addition, our church's educational programs, the Methodist Preschool and Parents' Morning Out, are just getting started. Our adult programs are also starting up again and there's a Journeys class meeting in the Fireside Room after fellowship time today. As for worship, we are in a season of learning and growth that will carry us right up to the start of Advent in November. Our lectionary texts are all about the sayings, parables, and example of Christ. So, let's settle into our desks, get out our pens and paper, and listen to the Lord our teacher.

We begin our journey with one of my least favorite subjects: mathematics. I thrive in the humanities, but I have at times struggled with those STEM topics. In church meetings, we invariably turn to numbers at some point and I have to confess to the members that I am a methodist, not a "math-odist."

Our Gospel reading today is all about numbers. Matthew begins this passage with a question from Peter. He asks how many times he should forgive his brother. At first, Peter suggests seven times as a good number. Jesus offers a much more challenging figure saying that we should forgive not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Some translations even say "seventy times seven," which would be four hundred and ninety times, if you do the math. Then, Jesus tells a parable about a king who forgives a big debt – ten thousand talents – when his steward can't pay. However, that steward shows great cruelty to his debtor when he can't pay back one hundred denarii. Seven, seventy-seven, four-hundred ninety, ten thousand, one hundred – what do all these numbers mean? I said I'd go to church. No one told me there would be math!

I turned to the New Interpreters Bible for a little bit of help puzzling all this out. There is a full set in the church library and, if you're struggling to understand a passage, don't hesitate to drop by and look it up. The wisdom I received in this reading is that the numbers in this Gospel reading are not exactly what they seem. It's not about giving exact figures. Rather, it's about giving the right impression.

First, when Peter proposes seven, he feels like he's being generous. That is a lot of times to forgive someone for the same offense. It's also a highly symbolic number. Seven is often associated with completeness in the Bible. The seven days in the creation story are another great example. It's also a number associated with vengeance. God says that anyone who harms Cain will face seven-fold vengeance. So, Peter is suggesting not only a generous number, but a fulfilling one. It feels right. Jesus corrects him and says we must forgive seventy times seven. This is an even more complete number. It's also one with a Biblical pedigree. In Genesis, Lamech famously boasts that if Cain would be avenged seven times, he would seek vengeance seventy times seven times. Jesus number is also satisfying and historic. However, when we get pulled down into the weeds on these numbers, we might lose the big picture.

The New Interpreters Bible says the point in choosing such a large number is to make it uncountable. If you say you must forgive someone seven times, then people aren't really forgiving. They're keeping track of each transgression. They're preparing to punish you for them all the moment you cross the line and do it an eighth time. Jesus chooses a number so great that we won't even bother to think about it. We're truly forgiving, not just biding our time until we're allowed to punish.

It reminds me of another parable, this one from the life of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque. St. Margaret began was having visions and hearing voices. She thought she might be communing with God, but she was afraid. She knew that the devil is mischievous and might pretend to be God to lead her astray. She asked her confessor what to do. He started giving her theological questions to ask this voice. Every day, Margaret returned and told the priest the voice's answer. It was always correct, but the priest had to admit that didn't prove anything. The devil knows all about God and Christian theology while still remaining an enemy. Finally, the priest had an epiphany. He told Margaret to ask the voice "what sins did I confess yesterday." She returned the next day and told the priest the voice said, "I do not remember." At last, the priest believed that this was truly the voice of God. For the devil remembers our sins and uses them to drive us apart from God but, when we confess, the Lord does not remember our transgressions.

Don't let the math mystify the message. The point is not whether we should forgive seven times, seventy-seven times, or seventy-times-seven times. What Jesus is saying is that our forgiveness should be beyond

counting. The Lord chooses not to remember our transgressions. How then can we dare to keep track of our neighbors'?

There's a message behind the math in Jesus' parable, too. He tells the story of a king and his servant. The servant is in debt to this great ruler, but the figure Jesus quotes is silly. He says that this servant owes ten thousand talents. The New Interpreters Bible points out that this is many times more than what the King of Judea paid in tribute to Rome every year. No one on earth has that kind of money. In the story, that servant then meets someone who owes him money. That figure is more reasonable, but not insignificant. The NIB says that it would be several months salary. It's noticeable, but miniscule compared to the earlier figure.

So, let's paraphrase the story using that information. Jesus says, "let's say there's this guy, and he owes the government a bajillion dollars." They plan to throw him in jail, but he begs for forgiveness and the king forgives it, just like that. Then, that same guy runs into a friend who owes him \$10,000 dollars. When the man can't pay, he wants to throw him in jail. The government hears about this and realize this guy's a hypocrite, so they throw him jail forever. There's some humor in it. There's some exaggeration in it. The numbers aren't meant to be exact, but they are meant to make a point. The message behind the math is relatively simple. We should forgive even significant wrongs from our neighbors because, when compared to what God has forgiven, they are just a drop in the bucket. Like the previous story, the point is not that we should get down in the weeds looking at these numbers. It's very much the opposite. Jesus is saying, "stop keeping track." Stop weighing your rights and wrongs against your neighbors. Get lost in the love of God.

Our reading from Romans offers a related message. Paul is writing to early Christians living in the heart of the empire. From the context, it's clear that they are having debates about how best to practice this new faith. Some are insisting on keeping the older Jewish purity laws. They won't eat meat – presumably because what is available in Rome is not kosher or has previously been sacrificed to idols. Others in the church have no qualms about eating meat. Some are following older Jewish calendars and observing holy days. Others do not believe that calendar applies in this new faith. It's not necessarily an ethnic thing. Paul, after all, is a Jewish man who no longer follows those priestly codes. In fact, he refers to those following them as, "weak in faith." You might think Paul would say those voluntarily following extra rules would be strong in faith, but he sees it as a weakness.

However, the message he gives is similar to the one Jesus gave in our gospel reading: stop keeping track.

He tells the church in Rome to keep their eyes on their own papers. He said the important thing is to be authentic in what you do. If you feel called to avoid meat for the Lord, answer that calling. If you don't believe that's important, don't compromise yourself by simply going with the crowd. Above all, don't waste time worrying about what calling God has placed in your neighbor's life. The relationship that matters is the one you have with God. The goal is not to be better than your neighbor, but better than you were. The goal is not to be ahead of anyone, but rather to be as close as possible to God. That's the math that matters, not "who in the church has the most Jesus points."

I think this is an important message as we start out our, "back-to-school," season. Schools are often about competition and numbers. We grade things on a curve. We track your GPA. There's a dean's list and a valedictorian. Schools and teachers are graded on test scores. We rank the school districts in our state and even the nation. It feels like you can never make a mistake. It can be a pressure cooker. When it comes to Jesus' school, things are different. We have been forgiven many times, so we forgive others many times. We have been forgiven much, and so we forgive much. Our faith journey is not about being better than anyone else, but about being better than our past selves. It's not about being ahead of anyone else, but about always moving closer to God. There are numbers in our stories, but they aren't there to reduce faith to facts and figures. It's quite the opposite. The numbers in these stories are there to remind us that the thing that matters most – God's grace – is beyond measure. So, stop keeping track. **Amen.**