

WORSHIP

Sermon | 8.19.2018



Back To School: Arithmetic

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Matthew 18:15-22

[Jesus said] 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

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There's something the air this time of year.

A quickening of the pace.

Longer lines at Target.

A little more traffic in the morning.

Soon, the yellow caution lights will start flashing.

The big yellow fellows will take to the roads.

It's just about time to go back to school.



Inspired by my friend and colleague, Tom Are, pastor at Village Presbyterian Church in Kansas City, we are starting a new sermon series that capitalizes on the moment and the energy of this time of year. There is something exciting – and hopeful – about starting a new year of learning. It’s not just students who feel it. Parents feel it too. As do folks who haven’t been to school in years and don’t have kids picking out their school supplies and lunchboxes.

This time of year presents us with an opportunity for a new rhythm. For growth. New opportunities. A fresh start.

A friend once told me about an encounter that someone had with the great American poet Maya Angelou. In the course of their conversation, trying to impress her and prove a point, they said, “I am a Christian.” She replied – “you’re a Christian? **Already??** That’s impressive!”

The Greek word for disciple is *mathetas* – which means “student,” or “learner.” Those earliest disciples called Jesus rabbi – “teacher.” And for them, there was no such thing as “being a Christian” – it was always about *becoming a Christian*. Learning more. Growing more. Appreciating more.

One way to think about the Christian faith is that it is a matter of going to school – or back to school. When he encountered the people who would become his disciples, his students, Jesus said, “follow me.” And so they did – and they learned along the journey.

Today our subject is arithmetic. So let’s listen for a word from God – in this encounter between a rabbi and his students.

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I haven’t taken a real math class in 23 years.

In college, I was so determined not to take a math class that I took something called Symbolic Logic to fulfill my requirement. That was hard enough.

And yet to this day – once or twice a year – I will wake up in a cold sweat because I’ve had that dream. You know the one. You’re sitting at your desk. There’s a test in front of you. Your future and your happiness and your life depend on you answering enough of the questions to pass. But you didn’t study. And the questions and the concepts seem foreign. Then you start to panic. And you wake up wild-eyed, and your wife says, “how’d you sleep?”

I was okay at math.

I nailed my times tables.

First, outer, inner, last – that’s the order of operations. Yeah...still got it.

“At 10:00 am, train A left the station and an hour later train B left the same station on a parallel track. If train A travelled at a constant speed of 60 miles per hour and train B at 80



miles per hour, at what time did train B pass train A?”

Well??? Any takers? 2:00 pm – of course (I worked on that yesterday...)

I guess it was in eleventh grade that things started veering off track. That’s when I took pre-calculus from Ms. Chumas. I’m sure Ms. Chumas remembers a lot of her students – but I’m pretty certain I’m not one of them. I was certifiably average. I just wanted to keep my head down and survive. I was one of those students whose stellar homework grades lifted an anemic bunch of test scores to a place of respectability. Homework grades, you see, are graded on completion – not accuracy.

Calculus was where math got confusing.

Here I was thinking that math was concrete.

And then Ms. Chumas starts talking about functions “approaching” limits.

I was used to equations having answers, and then Ms. Chumas had us graph an equation – and the “answer” *approached* a number. Didn’t get there. It “approached.”

You might not be surprised that my call to ministry happened after I finished up two years of calculus with Ms. Chumas. I’d had enough of all that for a lifetime.

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Jesus was teaching his disciples about what it meant to forgive.

Forgiveness happens after someone does something.

After a mistake has been made.

After something happens that hurts someone.

So the first thing that Jesus teaches his disciples is what to do within the community of faithful when someone makes a mistake that hurts another person within their community. And his advice is pretty straightforward: you talk about it. You don’t ignore it. You don’t hope it will go away. You acknowledge it. You confront it. Directly – one-on-one. You don’t get together with your Bible study or your PW Circle to talk about the person that you need to talk to. You seek that person out. And you tell them what it was that hurt. Which is a way to honor the connection you have with that person – a connection in Christ.

If that works, they should ask for your forgiveness. And you should grant it. If it doesn’t work – you lean into the community. Your one-on-one becomes a small group. You bring in more sets of ears to listen, and hopefully their perspective can lead to righting the wrong.

If that doesn’t work – well...that’s another sermon.



But the point of that exercise – the goal of forgiveness – is healing.

It is to reconcile the community. To address what is broken – and work together to make it whole.

Peter hears Jesus, and he (DOESN'T KNOW HE'S TAKING ADVANCED MATH – SEVEN IS A PERFECT NUMBER – A COMPLETE NUMBER – SEVEN DAYS OF CREATION – JESUS UPS HIS GAME – THERE'S NEVER AN ANSWER – THERE ISN'T A LIMIT – ALL WE DO IS APPROACH IT)

EASY TO TALK ABOUT FORGIVENESS IN THEORY.

HARDER TO DO IN REALITY.

HURT IS REAL.

