

Matthew 18: 21-35 "It is Not About the Math" Rev. Janet Chapman 9/13/20

As the Kentucky Derby finally got its day in the sun a week ago, and Authentic upset Tiz the Law, I was remembering all the great horses that have taken to the track and their stories. One of my favorites is Seabiscuit, who although he didn't run the Triple Crown having not reached his stride until after the age of 3, managed to beat War Admiral, one of the greatest thoroughbreds ever to race. The film made about this underdog horse reveals a race early in the horse's career where he and his jockey, Red, are trailing the pack. It is initially of no concern, because Seabiscuit had been trained by his previous owners to lose. They would race Seabiscuit against bigger and supposedly faster horses to build those horses' confidence. The new approach was to now let him see the horses in the lead, bring him neck to neck with one, which happened in last week's Derby, and then let Seabiscuit loose to run as fast as he could. As Red looks for an opening to break through and execute the plan, another jockey passes them by aggressively pushing them aside. Red becomes so consumed with retaliating against the jockey who fouled him that he forces Seabiscuit to catch up to the jockey so that he can push him against the rails. Red loses sight of the race and abandons their strategy. His only concern is getting back at the jockey, and he loses the race, with only the offending jockey finishing behind him. When the race is over, Seabiscuit's owner and trainer questions Red, "Why didn't he follow the plan?" Red retorts, "He fouled me. Am I supposed to let him get away with that?" "Well yeah," says the exasperated owner, "when he is 40 to 1." "But he fouled me, don't you get that?"

It could have been a story Jesus might have used to explain his teachings today, wondering if we get it? In Matthew 18, there is a theme of connectedness and mutuality that is

being taught. The foundation of Matthew's understanding is that we are all connected. These connections can be positive or negative, life-giving and affirming, or toxic and oppressive. In order to create and maintain communal bonds that are positive, individuals and communities must be able to deal with sin or, in the terms of the movie, with being fouled. Why? Because relationships, and therefore community, are impacted by our ability or inability to forgive.

Rose Foti didn't attend the second wedding of her son, even though he invited her. It was a long, drawn out reason why, but she just wouldn't, so her son told her, "You know I'm never going to speak to you again." She said, "So be it." The truth is they did speak, but from then on their relationship had been ruptured – neither trusting the other. 19 years ago this past Friday, her son was about to go off his shift as a firefighter for New York City when everyone got the call to stay on, there was a major catastrophe at the Twin Towers and all hands were needed on deck. The rescuers never found his body, only a portion of his credit card and a shoe in what became the landfill for the tons of debris. She visits the Memorial site regularly and touches his name on the large slab. She said she isn't sorry she didn't go to the wedding, she is sorry she hurt him. It was never her intent to do so. But she can't ask for forgiveness, he's gone. And she has yet to forgive herself.

Can we all just admit that for most of us, there are very few things as tough as forgiving someone, even ourselves? Some of us feel justified in holding onto our grudges, stockpiling our injuries and using them as weapons. Some of us know what it is to sing the song of Lamech in Genesis 4, who was boasting to his 2 wives about "repaying" assault with murder; saying in effect, "If someone wrongs me, I will repay them, not just in kind, but 77 times over." In other words, there is no limit on the number of heads that will roll should anyone do him wrong. And

in that statement, the law of endless retribution and revenge gets encoded into the DNA of humanity forever. Borrowing from this story, Jesus responds to Peter's question, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times," or seventy times seven, depending on the version. But let's not get caught up in the mathematical limits here as that would be far too easy. Jesus has just gotten done telling the story of the Good Shepherd who leaves the other 99 sheep to go in search for the one lost sheep and when it is found, there is much rejoicing. It is the will of God that not one perish, all shall be taken back, redeemed. That story is good news for the lost sheep but what about the 99 who did what they were told, what about our celebration party? What about the forgiving wife whose husband continues to abuse her and then he asks for forgiveness over and over. Just how long is she supposed to put up with that? It is almost like Jesus catches himself after the sweet little story of the Shepherd taking back the lost sheep, and follows it with more realistic, sensible advice. "If your brother or sister sins against you, tell him about it. If he listens, great; if not, tell the church and, if he still won't listen to the church and do right, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Yes, Jesus has a sense of right and wrong, of justice, as he implies that when you've been wronged, try to settle it on your own. If that doesn't work, make it public. And if that fails, treat the person as a Gentile and a tax collector. Go on your way when repentance is neglected, when behaviors do not change, and your well-being is endangered.

It is in this context that today's text comes to light, almost as a balance once more to ward off our tendencies to utilize payback in our interactions with others. Will Willimon used to teach in his seminary classes on pastoral care that pastors should make it a rule to go bail out

their people once, even in the middle of the night. But twice, three times – no. Even pastors as moral guardians of the community must have limits. So it is at this point that Peter’s hand goes up. “Lord, did you say limits? What are the limits? Three strikes and you’re out? One verbal warning, then you get a Technical? No? Yes, we’re Christians, the world’s doormats, so let’s just say that we are long-suffering and we forgive 7 times. How do you like those numbers, Jesus?” And even Peter who wasn’t so good at math knew Jesus’ response was big money. We can almost hear his protest, “Why, if we forgive people that often, we’d go to our grave forgiving, we’d lose count forgiving by the time we were in our 30’s.” “Right,” says the Shepherd. “Think about it. You’d go to your grave forgiving.”

Now we have to watch Jesus here as sometimes we think he means one thing, only to find out later, he meant something quite different. I think it is Jesus’ way of showing us that the good news isn’t self-evident to our eyes. Sometimes it doesn’t make sense like we think it ought to. When all else failed in regards to confronting the offender in the faith community, Jesus says treat him like a Gentile or tax collector. Who is Jesus condemned for hanging out with? Gentiles and sinners. Who wrote this Gospel we are reading? A tax collector! Before we focus on how much someone else needs to repent and be forgiven, possibly we need to take a look at ourselves. To what are we choosing to connect with in life? The many fouls that have been unleashed on us or to the values and actions that identify us as God’s people? It is so easy to become like Red the jockey, or the unforgiving servant in our parable, and lose focus on our identity as God’s people as well as the purpose for which God has called us. Consider for yourself, do our actions in the situation bring us closer to fulfilling our purpose on earth or lead us away from it? In order for Red not to lose sight of the larger purpose in that horse race, he

needed to handle the foul with a different sort of currency. In retaliating against the other jockey, he shares the same and equal fate as they both lose. It is the same in the parable as both slaves lose and the ripple effects carry out in the larger community in which they are connected. What is needed is a change of heart as much as a change in perspective. Ticht Nhat Hahn says forgiveness will not be possible until compassion is born in your heart, until you see the one who has wronged you as also a victim of hate, anger, and violence. At the moment of the foul on the racetrack, Red couldn't imagine the embarrassment or disgust the other 40 to 1 jockey must have been feeling that would lead him to do such a thing. All that mattered was revenge. Neither jockey had compassion for themselves, therefore, there was no victory off the track. Rose Foti was interviewed several years after 9/11 regarding the potential for a Forgiveness Garden near Ground Zero. The thought was that forgiveness comes in its own time, it can't be forced or coerced; we can create the space but we can't control its realization. Rose's response, after much thought was, "Yes, I think we need one. It may help me forgive myself. Maybe then I can forgive others." To our surprise, we have met the Gentiles and tax collectors, and they are us. The good news is that's just the sort of lost sheep Jesus loves to save.