

Sunday, February 18 (Genesis 45:3-11,15; Luke 6:27-38)

by [Phyllis Kersten](#) in the [January 31, 2001](#) issue

Keeping score and getting even—that's what enemies do. Time after time the Tutsis and then the Hutus have waited their turn to get even with each other in Rwanda. In the last outbreak of violence, loyalty to tribe even outweighed allegiance to religious vows for some clergy.

Sacred sites in Jerusalem separate rather than unite. Each side believes it a sign of weakness to permit any violence to occur without a retaliatory response. So the body count increases, and the promise of peace is more of a mirage with each passing day.

In such a world as this, what do we make of "the ethics of the kingdom"? You know the words: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Forgive."

Maybe the first thing to say about these teachings is that they're largely ignored. We catch glimpses, however, of how Jesus's teachings could provide a new way for us to live together: in the U.S. Marshall Plan's assistance to former enemies following World War II; in the recent work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa; in the World Bank's partial forgiveness of the debts of poor nations at the urging of church coalitions.

The second thing to say about this section from Luke is that it is a dangerous text and has often been misused in the past, especially by the church. It became a word preached to slaves and others in abusive relationships in order to keep them in their place. Jesus did not intend his words to be applied against the oppressed. Instead, he tells the disciples:

"You know the system this world runs on? It is all based on keeping score. If anyone injures you, you retaliate and injure him.

"And what about the positive relationships in your lives? There, too, it's all about keeping score. Someone gives you a gift, you give one in return. Someone invites you to his house for dinner, you reciprocate. But what credit is there in that for

you?” Jesus asks.

Three times Jesus asks, “What credit is it to you if you love someone who loves you, if you do good to someone who does good to you, if you lend to someone who will later lend something to you?” The Greek word translated as “credit” is *charis*, which most often is translated as “grace.” So we could paraphrase these verses to ask, “What grace is that of ours to love just those who love us, or do good to those who do good to us, or lend to those who can lend us something back in return?”

What Jesus calls on his disciples to do is “keep score no more.” To trust the God who pulled a paradigm shift on the cross, settling a whole world’s “old scores” then and there, and then tearing up the ledger.

Most of our worship services include public confession and forgiveness. Yet in our individual lives, in our families and in our congregations, there are often unresolved rifts of long duration. Siblings who haven’t spoken to one another for years and who, like Joseph, don’t even know if a family member is still alive. Parishioners and pastors who hold on to their grievances and can’t seem to get beyond them.

Reconciliation is always tough to come by, but especially difficult when someone has taken away something that can never be given back. The life of a young person with a promising future snuffed out by a drunk driver or a random act of violence. Children whose innocence is forever taken away by rape, torture or abuse. A congregation in Colorado seemingly unable to minister both to the victims of the Columbine High School massacre and to the parents of one of the attackers.

How does reconciliation or forgiveness happen? It is not something that well-meaning bystanders can legislate. To be forgiven and to forgive are always gifts of grace that come from some place beyond ourselves.

What Joseph does is simple: he “keeps score no more.” As Walter Brueggemann puts it in his Genesis commentary, Joseph breaks from the past and “invites his brothers to put that pitiful past behind them” as well.

“Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because of how you treated me,” Joseph says to his brothers. “For God sent me here before you to preserve life.” Somehow Joseph could see God at work not only in the good things that happened in his life, but also in the evil done to him by others. Joseph’s decision to keep score no more creates the possibility of a new future for himself and his family. Otherwise

they would all still be controlled by and captive to the past.

It is important to remember, however, that no one else could say to Joseph, "God has brought you here." Until Joseph discovered that for himself, he was unable to see good coming out of evil. Nor can we tell someone who has suffered a great evil at the hands of others that God is bringing good out of the tragedy. If it is going to happen at all, the victims must discover for themselves that God has somehow created something new out of their suffering, that out of their survival God's grace can even provide food to save someone else from famine.

In Joseph we see a foreshadowing of Jesus our brother, who says, "Come closer to me. You needn't be paralyzed by your fear or tortured by your guilt any longer. For I was sent by God to give you life, and to be the bread of life for you. To lend you all the grace I have, that you might be a sign in the world of my new measure for giving and living, 'pressed down, shaken together, running over.' And so that you can enter a new future, where once and for all, keeping score is no more."