

Proper 19A – SJ – To Forgive is not to Forget

Matthew 18:21-35 9/11/11

St. John's Episcopal Church, Salisbury, CT

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There are certain days that, as a nation, Americans are simply not going to forget. Each of us, so long as we are old enough, is going to be able to tell an inquirer just where they were when we heard the news of the events at Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, or of what occurred in Dallas in November of 1963, and, perhaps most especially, of what happened in New York City ten years ago today. What has come to be known so well as simply "9/11" has had a profound effect on each one of us. The psychic wounds for some have been enormous; the practical effects, for that matter, are felt each time one of us undertakes to fly anywhere, with the whole apparatus of the TSA a direct outcome of what occurred on 9/11.

It's particularly ironic, therefore, that all of the readings today, on 9/11's tenth anniversary, should speak so directly to issues 9/11 has raised, issues of judgment and of forgiveness. The story about Joseph's response to his brothers' entreaty is, despite their readiness to serve as **his** slaves, to forgive them for having sold him into slavery in Egypt; Paul asks in his letter to the Christians in Rome why they should pass judgment on or despise their brothers or sisters, or, in fact, anyone else; and, of course, Matthew quotes Jesus, when he is asked by Peter whether he must forgive another as many as seven times – which is meant to represent a **lot** of times – that he, and, by extension we, should forgive not seven, but seventy seven times. In fact, the translation of the Greek is ambiguous; so some translations have it not seventy-seven, but seventy **times** seven, or 490 times, a number meant to be so vast as to really mean "infinite."

The parable that Jesus tells to illustrate his response to Peter's question is likewise hyperbolic in the extreme. A slave owes his master, the king, 10,000 talents. To put that amount into perspective, consider this. A talent was equal to 10,000 denarii, while a denarius was equivalent to the amount a laborer in that society could expect to earn in one day. So a talent would equal the amount a laborer could earn if he worked seven days a week for nearly twenty-seven and a half years. But the amount he owes his master is not one but 10,000 talents; so, if my math is correct, that would represent the accumulation of daily wages, assuming he spent nothing, of approximately 365 years – not very likely for a slave to be able to do, even if he could **live** that long. The amount, then, is clearly not meant to be realistic, but to be evocative – evocative of just how much the slave owes the king – and therefore, by extension, how much **we** owe God. The parable goes on to say that, although the king forgave the slave this huge debt, the slave immediately then turns around to a fellow slave who owes **him** only a hundred denarii, and actually seizes the other by the throat while demanding his money, and, denying his plea for more time, has him cast into jail. To say that the king is not pleased with the slave's behavior when it is brought to his attention is as great an understatement as the amount the king

forgave the slave is an overstatement. God is clearly not going to be happy if we fail to forgive others.

What are we to do with these stories about judgment and forgiveness on this day – a day that will inevitably bring back the pain of loss – the loss of the lives of those who perished in New York, Virginia and Pennsylvania – people we may have known ourselves, or through friends, or only through what we have read or seen about them in papers or on TV – and the loss of the lives of those who have subsequently died in Iraq or Afghanistan, in the wars that have followed 9/11? Peggy Noonan reminds us in a column published just yesterday morning that 9/11 is a day that none of us who are old enough to remember where we were are likely to forget – and that we shouldn't forget, since we'll remember not only the pain but also the heroism – the heroism, for example, of the 343 firemen who gave – **not lost** – but **gave** their lives that day as they served others – just as Jesus came not to be served but to serve.

Those who know something about forgiveness – for example, Frederick Luskin, director of the Forgiveness Project at Stanford University and author of *Forgive for Good*, and Nobel Laureate, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and who authored *No Future without Forgiveness* – make it clear that forgiveness is much more about our ability to let go of our own feelings of pain and anger than it is about our absolving others of responsibility for their actions – or about forgetting [what Tutu calls “amnesia”].

The fact that we forgive is also not to ignore the danger that evil acts present. There is every reason for the nation to attempt to neutralize the perpetrators of those acts. Indeed, you may remember that Pope John Paul II was the subject of two assassination attempts, the first time in 1981 being shot and wounded by a Turkish militant. Two and a half years later the Pope visited the would-be assassin in prison and forgave him, but that didn't also lead to his lobbying that the person who shot him be released from custody – which he was just last year, 25 years later. One of the most painful things, however, that resulted from the terrible events of 9/11 was the anger in some people that resulted in cases of indiscriminate aggression not only against Muslims who were perfectly peaceful and loyal citizens of our country but even against other people as well – Sikhs, for example – who were mistaken for Muslims. Those acts were clearly the result of anger that wasn't as successfully dealt with as John Paul dealt with his.

Perhaps the most important insight of Christianity, distinguishing it from other religions, is that we are all flawed human beings – something that is conveyed through our religion's interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve – regardless of whether that story is thought of as literal or metaphorical. That we are all flawed human beings and that – like the king in today's gospel – God forgives us anyway. Can we likewise forgive those who do horrid things to us and to those we care about? I know it's tough at times to even think of that possibility, but it is at the center, not at the periphery of Christianity. Seventy-seven times we are to forgive,

we were told this morning. And every time we attend a church service, and many other times, probably, each week, we recite the prayer Jesus taught us as a model for how we should pray, which, in the most modern translation, puts it: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Notice: we are not asking to be able to forgive as God forgives. Instead, we're asking God to forgive **us** as **we** forgive others. Now, will God **not** forgive us if we **fail** to forgive? Certainly not the God I worship. But the point is that forgiveness is not about our efforts to gain God's approbation, his approval, our ticket to heaven. It is rather about not hardening our own hearts and refusing to release the pain – thus holding ourselves captive to that pain. The base meaning of the Greek word used here for forgiving is about releasing something the way we might release a little bird we've caught. Thus, we too by forgiving can let the pain and anger fly away.

As we look back these ten years then, let us do so to remember those we lost – and those who proved to be so courageous. But let us also resolve to work in whatever way possible towards a world in which no one, of whatever nationality or religion, will ever have to walk in fear that any one else, filled with hate, may harm him. It's been a lot of years since the image of turning swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks was first articulated by Isaiah. Can't **we**, by **our** acts, help to bring that reality just a bit closer?

AMEN