

The First and Franklin St. Presbyterian Church  
Baltimore, MD  
September 11, 2011

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Matthew 18:21-35  
Ordinary 24

### **Forgiving But Not Forgetting**

We gather here this morning to remember a day 10 years ago that most of us would rather forget. It was an absolutely beautiful Tuesday morning, a perfect day, that is, until the planes crashed into the World Trade Centers, the Pentagon, and a field. Suddenly our lives seemed to be turned upside down. We went from tranquility to uncertainty, staring at our TV sets, glued to our radios, frantically seeking to make contact with our loved ones, and unsure of what would come next. Cities emptied out, the skies became eerily quiet, parents rushed to pick up their children at day care centers and schools, and many sought out their churches for prayer. At the conclusion of the morning 2996 people were dead, 236 of them citizens from more than 90 other countries.

Many will gather this day at what we now call, "Ground Zero" to remember those who died and to dedicate the memorial to their names. The closing sentence on the memorial reads: "May the lives remembered, the deeds recognized, and the spirit reawakened be eternal beacons, which reaffirm respect for life, strengthen our resolve to preserve freedom, and inspire an end to hatred, ignorance and intolerance."

We also gather here today as God's people to listen to the Word of God and to hear what it has to say to us in our time and place, especially on a day such as this.

The lectionary for this Sunday concerns forgiveness, not a bad confluence of God's active presence in our lives and our thoughts for this day. It begins with Peter questioning Jesus about how often he needs to forgive another. "Seven times?" he asks. "No" Jesus responds, "Not seven times but seventy-seven times." (Or in some translations, seven times seventy.) In either case the number is large and the point is that calculating the limits on forgiveness cannot and should not be done. Then to underscore the point Jesus told him a parable.

Actually he went beyond the normal bounds for a parable and told him a rip roaring tale that is exaggerated almost to the point of being silly. It begins when a king discovered a slave who owed him a debt of ten thousand talents (more than 15 years' worth of salary) and it is hard to know who in this case was more foolish - the slave for living beyond his means or the king for loaning him so much money. The king realizing his mistake sought to cut his losses by selling the slave, his family and all his belongings. The slave obviously begged for forgiveness and promised to repay the loan (not a chance), but... the king out of a very generous heart, forgave the debt. Act 1 ends well, but the story continues. The forgiven slave happened to run into another slave who owed him a tad bit of money and suddenly the story turned dark. The forgiven slave demanded his money and when the other could not pay, despite his pleading, he had him thrown into debtors' prison. In Act III the king heard what happened and was angered by it and cast the thankless slave into a torture chamber. Jesus concluded, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Forgiveness is hard work. Often we prefer to remain as victims, feeling sorry for ourselves, holding on tightly to our hurt feelings and anger because revenge is then an option and it would feel so good to reverse the Golden Rule and "do unto others as they did unto you." Or perhaps we think we might forgive if we could put conditions on our forgiveness forcing the other to do restitution for their actions.

Theologian Marjorie Thompson wrote:

*To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be. ... Forgiveness involves excusing persons from the punitive consequences they deserve because of their behavior. The behavior remains condemned, but the offender is released from its effects as far as the forgiver is concerned. Forgiveness means the power of the original wound's power to hold us trapped is broken.* (“Moving Toward Forgiveness” Weavings, April 1992, 19)

Rabbi Harold Kushner illustrates this in the story of a young angry woman who came to him for counseling. Her husband had recently left her with their three children and little money. Kushner told her she needed to forgive him and when she protested he said;

*“I am not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable, It wasn't; it was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter angry woman. I'd like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding on to him. You're not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, but you're hurting yourself.”*

So we need to be cautious this day and every day, especially those of us who vividly remember the sights and uncertainty of 9/11, that our remembrance does not enslave us to bitterness, fear, and a coldness of heart which continue to seek revenge. Don't we bear enough of the scars of the day, not just in the loss of life, or in the empty hole in lower Manhattan but also ten years later in how we chose to react as a country? We have lost certain freedoms because security is now our primary concern, our Muslim brothers and sisters are still viewed with suspicion, we have spent trillions of dollars on two wars and placed our country deeper and deeper into debt and have lost more lives in those wars than we lost on September 11th, Guantanamo Bay continues to operate, torture methods have tarnished our reputation across the globe, and in actuality we are really no safer than we were before.

In an article by David Rieff, entitled, After 9/11 The Limits of Remembrance, which appeared last month in Harper's Magazine he wrote;

*Remembrance is not valued for shedding much light on the truth in all its nuance and ambiguity. And that is entirely appropriate. The problem is both the degree to which remembrance nourishes illusions about how long human beings can remember and, far more seriously, the potentially grave political and historical consequences it can engender. After all, to remember may not just mean to grieve; it may also mean to harbor a vision of securing justice or vengeance long after it is time to put the guns away. ... Remembrance can make history itself seem like nothing so much as an arsenal full of the weapons needed to keep wars going and peace tenuous.*

We may never forget but we can chose in our remembering to forgive and by forgiving move on to be other people seeking to restore the breach which has been created. This is the forgiveness and love of which Jesus spoke. Even when we have been grievously wounded by others we should love them because they too are children of God. We are called upon to forgive as God in Christ Jesus forgave us. As Christians we are in the forgiving business whether we like it or not. Because of the gracious love of God shown to us in Jesus Christ we know that our incredibly large debt load of sin has been astonishingly forgiven by a merciful God. As we are forgiven so we too are called to forgive. Yes, it may be difficult but it is this power of love which has the capacity to change the world.

Let me conclude this sermon by sharing with you a piece from Wednesday's "Washington Post" which I believe has the heart of forgiveness and love. It is an editorial written by Lynne Steuerle Schofield, about remembering Sept. 11. Her mother was on the plane which struck the Pentagon. She is not so certain all the services of remembrance are the right way to recall her mom and all those who died that day. She recommends a new way of commemorating the day which would make the world a better place. In order to do this she speaks of building our relationships with others and raising money for our favorite charities. She writes:

*I believe that is true for all of us as citizens of our country and our world. If we want the world to be more compassionate, safer and more equitable, we have to work to make that happen. We all have to be on board. We should reflect on the characteristics of our loved ones that we want to keep alive, and then we must behave that way.*

*So next year on Sept. 11 please don't invite me only to remembrance ceremonies. Instead, let's make our ceremonies ones that include reflection and action.*

*Let us as a country move into the final stage of grief, toward acceptance and renewal. Reflect on what you want the world to be in 10 years then look forward and act on those reflections. Transform those reflections into reality.*

(Sept.7, 2011, A19)