

Sept. 11, 2011

Matthew 18:21-35

Repaying God

As you all know, today is the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, DC. A fourth plane went down in Shanksville, Pennsylvania as a result of the heroic efforts of the passengers, who acted quickly to prevent the plane from hitting its intended target and killing even more people.

Over the past few days, as I watched videos and heard the stories of people who lost loved ones in that attack, my heart broke all over again.

My emotions ten years ago had been primarily shock and fear---the terror that the attackers were going for. For that day, at least for me, and I'm guessing for many of you as well, the terrorists had won.

That day I watched the tv in the teachers lounge, motionless, holding onto the secretary so we could hold each other up, mouth open, tears streaming. When the towers collapsed, we did, too.

And then the secretary and I and all the other teachers had to pull ourselves together---the children were arriving for school. We had a job to do. But I don't remember anything else about that day except crying and choking on my tears.

Now, ten years later, my emotions are much less sharp. I am not particularly afraid, although I have some level of anxiety that there will be another attack. I am no longer shocked, having grow

We have had ten years to absorb this new reality. But I wonder if we have really come to terms with it.

It took nearly ten years for our troops to find and kill Osama Bin Laden. I watched the celebrations in the streets of this country on tv that day and was reminded too strongly of the celebrations we saw in the Middle East as the World Trade Center fell.

And I wondered if we have learned anything in the past ten years.

I am not saying Bin Laden did not deserve to die! In fact, the words that came out of my mouth when I heard that he had been killed were, "The world is a better place." But I don't think I'm proud of that reaction.

Because I wonder what Jesus would have said. I wonder what Jesus would have done in response to 9/11. I wonder what Jesus wants us to do now, ten years later.

Our scripture passage this morning is about forgiveness. Now, I didn't choose this passage. It has been in the lectionary this way for many years, since long before the twin towers were even built. And yet it speaks to me so clearly on this day!

Peter asks Jesus how many times we must forgive someone who does something wrong. And we all know Jesus' answer--70 times 7---in other words, more times than you can count. Don't even bother to keep score!

We pray every week that God will "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Words are powerful. If we don't mean them, we shouldn't say them, especially not over and over and over again.

If God forgives us as we forgive others, I think a whole lot of us are going to go unforgiven! Because too many of us have a hard time forgiving others.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, when Jesus taught his followers the Lord's Prayer, he says, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

He couldn't have made it any clearer.

If you don't forgive, you won't be forgiven.

Some people will tell you that we only have to forgive people who are repentant, who have asked for forgiveness and are willing to change.

I don't see anything like that here, not when Jesus is teaching the Lord's Prayer.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying we should stand defenseless and be used as a human punching bag, forgiving the one who is hitting us over and over while we become a bloody mess.

I don't think Jesus is saying that! We can take action to protect ourselves, like moving out of range or blocking the blows, because to allow ourselves to be abused and hurt again and again is not loving ourselves or respecting ourselves as God's children!

But he does say to forgive---so once we have done what we can to stop the hurt, we need to forgive.

But when I remember again the scenes of 9/11, of people jumping from the towers and then those huge buildings coming down and the many lives lost that day, and I have to say “How? God, help me, HOW?”

Seventy or so years ago, a woman named Corrie ten Boom lived in Holland. She was a watchmaker, about fifty years old when the Germans invaded her country in World War II.

She and her sister Betsie were unmarried. They lived with their father above their watch shop. Many of their neighbors and customers were Jewish, and they hid as many people as they could to keep them safe from the Nazis.

Eventually they were betrayed and arrested. Their father died within days. The two sisters ended up in Ravensbruck, a concentration camp for women. Betsie died there. Corrie was released through some sort of clerical error only a few days before she was scheduled to be sent to the gas chambers.

One of the guards there was particularly cruel to Corrie and Betsie. There seemed to be no humanity in him at all and he delighted in their pain and anguish.

After the war, Corrie felt called by God to return to Germany and bring reconciliation. She had prayed not to go to Germany and God did not give her what she wanted.

One night she was speaking to a church group there about forgiveness and she saw this guard, the one who had caused her and Betsie so much pain and suffering, coming toward her. He did not recognize her.

He knew she had been in Ravensbruck, though, and he extended his hand to her, asking for her forgiveness.

She described her struggle at that moment in her book, "Tramp for the Lord."

"..I stood there---I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven---and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place---could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

"It could not have been many seconds that he stood there---hand held out--  
-but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do....

“And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion---I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

‘Jesus, help me!’ I prayed silently. ‘I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.’

“And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands.

“And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’”

If a survivor of a German concentration camp, who lost her father and her sister to the atrocities that the Nazis committed during the war, can forgive a guard who had the power to make her time there a little easier and instead chose to make it worse, maybe there is hope for us, no matter who we need to forgive, and for what.



We may need to pray for God's help to forgive Bin Laden and the people who flew those planes on 9/11, but we need to say that prayer.

We need to forgive those who have "trespassed against us" whether they are living or dead, whether they might hurt us again or not.

Because God forgives us whether we might sin again or not.

To forgive means that, like Corrie, we admit that we need God's help, that we depend on God to not only forgive us, but to help us forgive others.

Now why would God say that we won't be forgiven unless we forgive others? In the parable that Jesus told, the Master forgave a servant a huge debt, so much money that he couldn't possibly ever pay it back! And the servant immediately attacks another servant, demanding payment of a much smaller sum, and has him thrown into prison.

This was an act of complete ingratitude! To be forgiven and then not to forgive! To be shown mercy and then to be merciless!

And God responds by putting him in prison, appalled at this cruel behavior! Because this is what arouses the wrath of God---our own inhumane treatment of each other! And yes, I am sure that God not only cried for the great loss of life of 9/11, but that God's wrath burned against the people who were responsible!

But it's not up to us to withhold our forgiveness. It's up to God and God alone to judge them. What we must try to do is forgive them, because our sins are forgiven by God, who judges our actions as well.

If we have trouble forgiving others, maybe we are ungrateful to God. Maybe we don't even realize how sinful we are and so we don't think we need forgiveness. Maybe we find ourselves thinking that we are not so bad---we are pretty good people. We are certainly not as bad as those terrorists!

And that is true, by human measure. But God measures what is in the heart---the love we show---how well we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and how well we love our neighbors as ourselves.

And none of us is innocent of breaking those two commandments, especially if we don't ask God for forgiveness and if we don't forgive others.

So we need to acknowledge our own sins, the specks that are in our own eyes, before we can decide that someone else's sins, the log in someone else's eye, is so big that we can't forgive.

We owe God everything for forgiving us our trespasses against Him.

For every time we have failed to rely completely on God, for every time our faith has been weak, for every time we have failed to see Christ hungry or thirsty in our neighbors who are in need, for every time we judge others as being unworthy of love, and more---

We need to confess those sins and ask for forgiveness.

The truth is that none of us deserves God's love and mercy and forgiveness, but God is gracious and takes away our guilt.

We come before God forgiven, cleansed of our sin. We owe God more than we can possibly ever repay!

And then we go out and fail to forgive those who have trespassed against us.

We struggle to forgive the terrorists. Some of us even take our anger out on all Muslims, failing to realize that Muslims also died on 9/11. Many assumptions are made and judgments passed.

We are throwing them into prison when we have just been forgiven.

Instead of repaying God by forgiving those who have trespassed against us, we are trying to collect the debt. Jesus said God will throw us into prison for that.

The prison of bitterness, of hate, of being unforgiven.

Like Corrie ten Boom, we need to understand that forgiving others is not an emotion. It is an act of will.

We need to pray to God to help us forgive, to supply the feeling so that it will come from the heart.

We need to know that if we are ever to repay God for the many times we have been forgiven, we **MUST** forgive others.

Forgiving others, whether or not they are repentant, whether or not they are alive or dead, is the only way to be free from the debtors' prison where we are obsessed by the hurt that has been done to us.

Forgiveness is the only way to be free from the past and wishing it were different.

Forgiveness is the only way to become more and more like Jesus, who forgave all of us while he was dying a most terrible, tortured death on a cross.

Forgiveness is the only way to be forgiven and set free.

Pray for help to forgive on this day, and let's move on from a time of pain and sorrow at last. After ten years, let's wipe the slate clean and move into a future of light and hope and reconciliation and peace---the peace that only God can give.

Let us pray-----