

Sermon for September 11, 2011: The Price of Not Forgiving  
Matthew 18: 21 – 35

Most of us can remember where we were on that day: September 11, 2001. I remember turning on the TV while the kids were getting ready for school. I called my daughter to come and see the picture of the smoking building. And then, there were two smoking buildings, and before our eyes, one tower, and then the other, collapsed. I didn't know whether I should keep the kids at home or send them to school. I wanted to gather my chicks, like a mother hen.

It's a moment for which there was a before – and an after. Like Pearl Harbour or Hiroshima. Before – the world was like this. After – the world has changed.

That day was a wound. As America took a direct hit, so did the rest of the world. Who can be trusted? Who is to blame? Who will be attacked next?

In so many ways, 9/11 has shaped us as a society. If you've travelled on a plane or crossed the US border in the last 10 years, you know that for sure. But also, the effects of having your country engaged in war; the mistrust that many show towards Muslim people; the disillusionment, in general, as many lost faith in their fellow human being; and the ways in which fear seems to govern our collective actions. Fear, and not love.

When you receive a blow like this, the natural response is to strike back. And who could blame us for being angry? Who could blame anyone for wanting to find someone to pay for the crime?

Someone should pay.

And for ten years, someone did. Everyone did.

Afghanistan, Iraq... thousands dying, both militia and civilians.

The United States and Canada... many, many young people sent to die in a far off war.

When do we get to say that the debt has been paid?

Even the tracking down and killing of Osama Bin Laden was, for many, not satisfying. Who can rejoice at the death of another human being? I am reminded of the Jewish retelling of the Exodus story at the Seder meal. Even as Miriam danced and played her tambourine and sang praises to God “for the horse and rider are thrown into the sea,” the tradition at the Seder meal is to dip a pinky into the glass of wine, and see it drop like a drop of blood, with the remembrance, “does not God weep for the death of any of God’s children?”

What an amazing thing, to hear the readings for today – selected in what is called the common lectionary for this day decades in advance, and to hear Peter ask, “How often should I forgive my brother?”

We live in a changed world. When the gospel was written, my hunch is that the small Christian community was having relationship problems. That’s why Peter asks about his brother. But our community is bigger, now. We now know we have brothers and sisters. And our brothers and sisters may not even be a part of our own faith tradition. We are all connected – to each other, to all of Creation, and to God.

So, when a brother or sister sins against us, how many times should we forgive?

When someone has hurt you – beloved child of God – how many times must you forgive?

I heard a story about two fisherman, each in a tiny boat, fishing in the ocean, just offshore. Each of them caught an enormous fish on their line. To their horror, the fish were so big, they began dragging their boats out to sea.

One of the fisherman saw that to hang on to the fish would mean certain death, so he cut the line. The other hung on to his fish, and was dragged out to sea, never to be seen again.

Forgiveness means that you cut the line to the thing that is killing you.

Doesn't that sound easy?

In some of the reading I've done this week, I've wondered if the reason that sometimes forgiveness seems easy is because it's so hard.

It's so hard that it seems impossible. We have been wounded. The person that hurt us may be unrepentant. We have every reason to be angry and hurt, and stay that way. It's hard.

So the tendency of many people of faith is to spiritualize forgiveness. The words, "I forgive" may tumble out of our mouths, especially when they're directed at no one specific. We say in our prayer, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Forgiveness is spiritualized, ritualized. Sanitized.

Somehow, I don't think that's what Jesus was about.

The theologian Stanley Hauerwas points out that the allusion to forgiving seven or seventy or seventy times seven times is calling us to remember about the Feast of the Jubilee. That was the year, every seven times seven years – probably never happened – In that year all debts were to be forgiven, and whatever had transpired for people to lose their belongings and property – it would be restored and everyone would go back to their own land.

This kind of forgiveness would be real. It would be enacted in real life. In his excellent article in the Text this Week, John van de Laar says this:

It is about stepping out of the scale-balancing power-games of society, and embracing the injustice of God's system of grace. It is about making relationships, reconciliation and community the first priority and turning our backs on the kind of justice which requires "payback" or tit-for-tat. It is about choosing to do life and its primary systems of money, power and desire differently.

That shouldn't be hard, right?

Wrong. It is hard.

This isn't the first time that Jesus has told us this: forgive, pray for your enemies, pray for those who persecute you. This is not just spiritual stuff. In Jesus' opinion, I dare say, it is not negotiable.

And sometimes that means that it isn't fair, and there hasn't been payback. Van de Laar called his article "The Injustice of Limitless Forgiveness."

Make no mistake about this - the price of forgiveness is quite dear. It may require therapy, sacrifice, humility. In some cases it means dredging up memories in order to

deal with them. It may require even going to the authorities to get things into the light of day. It may require reconciliation with someone that you'd rather not deal with.

It may require seeing someone as a child of God, and not a demon.

It might require not getting your pound of flesh.

But the price of not forgiving is even worse.

In the parable that Jesus told, he describes this great price as being put into prison and tortured until the debt is forgiven. I think we build our own prisons, and forge our own torture.

Van de Laar reminds us of a beautiful story from the author Marilyn Cram Donohue in her book *The Pearl is in the Oyster*. She tells the story of a neighbour who had ritualized her resentment. Whenever a visitor came for a cup of tea or coffee, she would pour the drinks and then reach for an old and battered plastic sugar bowl. Then, apologetically, she would tell her story of the beautiful bone china bowl that her mother had owned, but that her sister had taken when her mother died and they divided up her possessions. She had never forgiven her sister, and had turned her bitterness into a daily routine that kept it fresh and growing.

She had allowed her life to be defined by her wounds. And she picked at it and worried it and nurtured her resentment until it was a demon that took over her whole life.

Our wounds, whether they be the ravages of World War II, or 9/11, or hurts that have come from our brothers and sisters – shape us and affect us and teach us and mould us –

but if they come to define us, then we will continue to live as victims. We will live as people who, not only cannot forgive, but we will never learn what it means to be forgiven ourselves.

Forgiving when someone doesn't deserve it – that's grace.

Being forgiven when we don't deserve it – that's grace. And pointing out God's grace was what Jesus was all about.

In a moment, we'll be inundated with the voices of children as they come from their Sunday School orientation downstairs. What do we want them to learn? How do we want them to be? Jesus teaches us that grace is what God is about, not just spiritually – for real. And he teaches, to quote another beloved politician, "Love is better than fear." Jesus asks us to forgive and be forgiven. Let's learn that, together. May it be, God. May it be.

A Prayer for September 11 (from Betty Lynn Schwabb)

Lover of All Humanity, Christ of Compassion and Mercy,  
Spirit who yearns for all to live in Holy Peace and Joy,  
We call to mind all who perished in the collapse of the towers:

*(a moment for silent remembering)*

We call to mind as well  
those who suffer today from the loss of their loved ones,  
emergency workers, firemen and women  
who immediately responded to the alarms.  
Too many of these perished as well.

And too many of those who did not perish  
share lingering nightmares and illness  
because of their faithful daring.

We pray for the children who lost parents that day,  
for parents who lost children that day,  
for visitors caught unawares,  
for people at work and at home near Ground Zero,  
for all who at great distances  
still live in judgment  
and thus in fear today.

Hear us as we silently lift up our sorrow to you:

*(a moment for silent intercession)*

We acknowledge this day  
That we do not love our enemy deeply  
Nor bless abundantly those who curse us.  
And at this anniversary,  
We find your call to forgive so difficult.  
Yet we are not alone, we live in your world.  
Gather us all into your embrace.  
As your beloved children,  
we know we are interrelated with one another  
though oceans or history may hold us apart.

How is it that humanity in all times and places can be so cruel  
And yet you keep loving us?

Hear the stirrings of our heart as we ponder silently:

*(a moment for silent confession)*

Help us to see our own responsibility  
in bringing about your healing and peace,  
in growing deeper respect and greater kindness,  
in offering examples of leadership and generosity  
fit for our day.

Inspire us to join with all who seek to understand  
and who take part in interfaith dialogues and conversations.

Hear us as we speak silently or softly the needs we have today [raising to you our  
prayers for ourselves, members of our community, our loved ones and our world]:

*(a moment for silent supplication)*

We know our great work with You, O God,  
continues.

Bless us on this grace-filled journey  
in the name of the Prince of Peace.

AMEN.

Written by Betty Lynn Schwab, CIM