

To Infinity and Beyond...  
Collegiate Presbyterian Church  
September 11, 2011  
Matthew 18:21-35

For me, unexpectedly, this has been a difficult week emotionally. Certainly I knew today was the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attacks on the world trade center, and the pentagon. Certainly I had been planning to preach about those very events. But I was caught off guard by the feelings that have bubbled to the surface in the face of all the remembering that has been in the media, on NPR, on PBS in the Des Moines Register, even in the Boone News Republican, our hometown paper. I have found myself profoundly sad, even weepy at times as I look again at the pictures that I had vowed I would not stare at again. There is a perversity in the staring. I want so much for what I know will happen to NOT happen. That the buildings will remain standing. That my world will go back to the way it was before September 11 2001. That there will not be wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. That 3000 people will not be dead on American soil and that tens of thousands will not be dead from war on foreign soil. That I will not have to take off my shoes or be body scanned to get on an airplane. That our Muslim friends and neighbors will not all be looked on with suspicion. But as I look at those images, I know profoundly that our world has changed, and probably not for the better.

The pain of these feelings leads to all sorts of goofy behaviors. I turn off the radio and sit in silence rather than hear any more. That's called denial. I rant and rave at my television when someone says something that I think is ridiculous. That's the anger. I watch the images again hoping by some miracle that this all didn't happen or that maybe by some time vortex, I could get God to turn back time. Bargaining. But this week in particular I have found myself to be not depressed, but blue about the whole thing. All recognizable behaviors of one who grieves. There is a pain deep in my soul that has been hiding there for ten years. I have been assaulted, if not physically, emotionally, and coping with that assault drops me to my knees.

I suspect many of you have had the same feelings these last weeks. The last ten years have yanked us out of the bubble we had been living in, and have made us face some realities in the world from which we thought we were immune. But we are not immune. And as a result of the events ten years ago, some of us have become xenophobic, angry, fearful and vengeful. Not our best qualities as human beings. But not unexpected when we are hurt. When someone inflicts pain on us, it is not unnatural for us to want to strike back. We seem to be hardwired that way. When someone inflicts pain on us, it is not unnatural for us to withdraw from that situation, protecting ourselves from more pain. When we are hurt, we certainly aren't inclined to be hurt anymore, to venture into the same situation again and again. It is not unnatural to feel like striking back. But natural or not, these reactions come from our most base instincts. They certainly do not represent the best we as humans can do, and they certainly do not represent what Christ would have us do.

The early church faced many times of pain and uncertainty. And Jesus knew that they would come into contact with those who would seek to do them harm. And he also knew that they would find conflict within their own walls an issue to deal with. What did he tell the disciples in the passage we heard last week? He described ways of dealing with internal strife. Go to the one who has harmed you and try to work it out. If that doesn't work, find a mediator. If that doesn't work find more of the community to help the two of you. And if that doesn't work they become to you as a tax collector or Gentile, in other words, as one with whom you live and work and eat and worship, whether you like it or not, in My name.

So today we confront the rest of the story as Paul Harvey would say. Peter, seeking to be clear asks Jesus how many times he should forgive, how hard should we work to overcome our differences, and throws out an outrageous number. "Even 7 times?", he asks almost tauntingly. In the ancient world, seven was a perfect number. Peter was asking, do I have to forgive perfectly, all the time over and over and over again? And Jesus response? You must forgive 7 times 70, or other translations say seventy seven times. A beyond perfect number. Or in the parlance of Buzz Lightyear, you must forgive to infinity and beyond! There is no statute of limitation, no end, no limit. If you are my follower, forgiveness is absolute.

Then Jesus tells the outrageous parable of the servant who has been called to account for the debt he owes his master. The debt is enormous. How could any servant owe such an amount, ten thousand talents when just one talent was the sum total for fifteen years of common labor? The story contains exaggeration on exaggeration to make the point. The servant begs for forgiveness of the debt, the master grants the forgiveness. Forgiveness that extends to infinity and beyond.

When I read this parable, I find myself wanting to change it. I want the master to forgive the servant, and for the servant to turn around and forgive his slave. But that is not what happens. Instead, the servant runs into his slave who owes him very little in comparison. And the servant cannot forgive the debt. Instead the servant grabs him by the throat and throws him into prison. When the master hears about the servant's behavior, he turns the servant over to the torturers and Jesus tells us so will God do to us, if we do not forgive from the heart.

But, let us tread lightly here. Our attention, shaped by the popular religious culture more interested in hell than in healing, is likely to get stuck on the end, where God's response to the unforgiving heart is compared to the unrelenting punishment of an angry master. This hyperbolic exaggeration is meant to underscore the importance of forgiveness. Really, the primary force of the parable makes clear; those who are unable to extend to others the mercy they have received from God are already ensnared, trapped, and doomed to a life of relentless calculations and emotional scarcity.

We all know someone like this, who cannot let go of a past wrong. Whose face and life reflect the bitterness of being hurt. We all know someone who cannot see the world through any other lens than that of the grievous sin inflicted upon them. They are never

satisfied, though they have all they need. They are never happy, though they may be surrounded by love. They want vengeance and continue to be enslaved by the past.

But Jesus makes it clear. We may not be able to forgive perfectly, but our intent is to forgive as we have been forgiven, infinite grace.

The parable also implies that while forgiveness is called for it cannot be forced. You know and I know that some things are harder to forgive than others. Yet we must open ourselves to receive from another realm that which we find humanly impossible to accomplish on our own. And if we can receive the gift of being able to forgive those who have done us serious injury, a spouse who has betrayed us perhaps, a parent who abused, a careless driver who killed, we will never want to forget that forgiveness is not forgetting. To forgive is not to deny the pain or the wrongness of an act. To forgive is not to excuse that which is unjust or cruel. To forgive means this: to make a conscious choice to be unbound by evil. When someone does an injury to us, the first injury they do is their fault but if we hold on to a feeling of vengeance and hatred in our own hearts, then that person does a second injury, and the fault for that can only be placed on our own shoulders.<sup>1</sup>

We can get stuck. But the lesson from Jesus: get unstuck. Being trapped in a life of pain, anger and vengeance reaps only pain, anger and vengeance.

There are so many stories about people who have left behind the bitterness, and forgiven those who have done them wrong. Japanese Americans who have forgiven those who put them in camps during the second world war. Holocaust survivors who have found a way to forgive their captors. One particular news account recently caught my eye about a young Muslim woman in Iran, who having been horribly disfigured and blinded by a man who felt she had spurned him, forgave him and requested that the normal punishment for such a crime which was to render him blind, not be carried out. She stopped the "eye for an eye" punishment for her attacker because she said, "such revenge is not worth it."<sup>2</sup>

Today we remember the decade ago that those four airplanes were hijacked and flown as weapons into our secure lives. Today we also remember the 2000 years ago that God looked out and saw broken lives and desolate hearts and sent the one who would forgive, redeem and save us. God chose forgiveness not vengeance, and thus opened a future marked not by judgment but by mercy, not by calculations but by trust, not by violence but by healing, not by scarcity but by abundance, not by hate, but by love, and not by death but by new life.<sup>3</sup>

As Christians, many of us find ourselves mired in ambivalence. Our grieving is still unfinished, our anger is not fully abated, our pain still palpable. Yet there is something at

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/adams\\_4606.htm](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/adams_4606.htm)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/07/31/iran.acid.pardon/index.html?iref=allsearch>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear\\_wp.aspx?article\\_id=508](http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=508)

**work within us that wants to leave the anger behind and wants to heal the wounds that were inflicted upon us these ten years ago. In our hearts, we know that healing begins with a most difficult and often painful decision: the decision to forgive.**

Yes, Jesus would have us look back, to remember, to give pause to grieve the violence, destruction and death as well as to rejoice the acts of courage, mercy, and solidarity the day and those that followed called forth. But Jesus would also have us look forward, to see and lean into a future that is not defined by the calamity of that day but instead is shaped by hope, possibility, and the grace of God, to infinity and beyond.