

## **Forgiveness; the Heart of the Gospel**

September 11, 2011

### **Scriptures: Genesis 50:15-21**

50:15 Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?"

50:16 So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died,

50:17 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

50:18 Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves."

50:19 But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?"

50:20 Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.

50:21 So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

### **Matthew 18:21-35**

18:21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

18:22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

18:23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

18:24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him;

18:25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.

18:26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'

18:27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

18:28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.'

18:29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'

18:30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

18:31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

18:32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

18:33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'

18:34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

18:35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

## Proclamation of the Word

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We mark time by remembering significant moments in life. Our birthdays, wedding anniversaries, graduation dates, the first time we said *I love you* to a special someone. We also mark time by those tragic moments and celebrative moments in our collective history. Scholars call these liminal moments. It is a threshold on which we stand that moves us from one place in time to another. Teenagers celebrate achieving the status of being licensed drivers and their lives and their parents will never be the same again.

Perhaps you remember exactly where you were and specific details of a liminal, threshold moment and a flag is planted in your memory.

- Sitting around the radio in the family living room with family and neighbors listening to the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor
- Sitting in front of the family TV hearing the news that President John F. Kennedy was shot or that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot, or that a man stepped foot on the moon.
- For me one of the first, but less significant threshold moments I remember was the evening news announcing that Elvis had died. More than the details of his death, I remember exactly where I was, my grandparent's farmhouse... the color of Grand Daddy Smith's den carpet, the paint peeling off his old rocking chair, the old wind-up mantle clock, tick-tock, tick-tock, the adults' disbelief and shock. Something big had happened; I knew it even if I was only in kindergarten. Children can act as barometers of our collective experience.
- Our lives have been affected by the events of September 11, 2001. It was a threshold moment. And a chink in our collective armor appeared like a crack in the Washington Monument revealing our vulnerability to harm. Something that had not ever happened on US soil finally happened. Each of us has our memories of that day 10 years ago. Where we were. What we felt. Who we lost. What we found.

Some of us were very personally connected like the church member who told me how it felt to lose members of their former church in New Jersey. Another described the eerie feeling of driving into New York City and seeing parking lots full of the cars of deceased commuters who had caught the train that morning never to return. Even if we were states away, we felt the effects of calamity and our foundations were shaken. Some of us ran to schools and daycares to collect our children to make sure they were safe from harm. Others of us called our neighbors to check on them. Some of us were stunned in shock and inaction. It was a corporate trauma experienced by our nation.

I remember gathering that night at our church and reading from the book of Lamentations and the Psalms giving voice to what we had no words to pray.

We remembered that others have felt this way, too. That others before us have been there.

Dr. Courtney Cowart was serving the church down the street from the World Trade Center. She recalls the next day when Archbishop Rowan Williams of the Anglican Church, who was one there throughout that morning of 9/11, offered this reflection at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine:

*"I'm sure in the city and the country in the days ahead, the pressure to do something, anything, is going to be greater and greater. The rhetoric will become more and more intense. There is something I want to say to that. One very simple personal observation. Quite simply: I wouldn't want what we experienced to happen to anybody. I wouldn't want to see another room of preschool children hurried out of a building under threat. I wouldn't want to see thousands of corpses given over to the justification of some principle. And very simply: I don't want anyone to feel what others and I were feeling at about 10:30 yesterday morning. I've been there."<sup>1</sup>*

Three weeks later I flew to New York for a clergy conference, and it took all my courage and will to step on that airplane leaving my loved ones behind, not knowing if I would be safe in the air or even at my destination. I have never been afraid to fly before. I prayed the whole way. I prayed for my pilot, for our safety, for the people on that airplane even those who might be intending to harm others, for all those who face terror everyday from Israel-Palestine to the Sudan. Others have been there before.

I remember feeling what it was like when my brother was killed in a senseless motorcycle wreck- the trauma, the grief. I learned as a young child that no mother, no father, husband or child, should have to endure this kind of senseless tragedy, loss, or violence. I feel like I can say with Archbishop Williams, I've been there. I've seen the grief and suffering. I learned to value life.

Because of 9/11 all of us have been there regardless of faith, color, creed or status.

While some are driven by rage, violence and despair, sometimes tragedy fills us a deep well of compassion and a broken and contrite heart. We acknowledge the unresolved anger, hurt, and fear that the events of that day caused.

Today, in Scripture, we find two parables, two conversations about people being horribly wronged or to use the language of Peter's question to Jesus, they have been "sinned against." I think these already scheduled lessons being read by Christians of many stripes across this nation are here by God's providence to instruct us and guide us in light of this 10 year Anniversary of September 11. They remind of the God in whom we trust. They remind us of God's deep and abiding purpose and mercy.

First, the first person wronged was Joseph. Joseph was thrown in a pit and sold as a slave by his older brothers because of their jealousy. Their father Jacob clearly preferred young Joseph over the rest. And in Matthew's gospel Jesus tells a parable of a slave and master. The slave has an enormous debt that he cannot possibly repay and is forgiven by his gracious lord, but he in turn will not be gracious to the one who has sinned against him. In both cases forgiveness does not come easily for the perpetrator or the one who has been wronged. We see that forgiveness is only possible with divine assistance. God is the source of grace and forgiveness.

Take the life experience of Joseph, betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, but who bears witness that what they intended for evil, God has used for good. God even uses these events for the good of those who

committed the sin, showing mercy on Joseph's brothers. Joseph has become Pharaoh's trusted Prime Minister and is able to save his own family from famine and starvation. He has offered his brothers his forgiveness in Chap. 45 when they come humbly asking for help. But they ask again after their father Jacob has died.

Why do they ask a second time?

Do they still carry the guilt of their sins and have not been able to accept Joseph's forgiveness?

Or do they fear retribution and revenge now that Jacob is not alive to engender good faith? For that is how the world works, right? An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth....there will be payback, revenge, comeuppance.

Both a guilty conscience and a fear of revenge are possible reasons for they humbly fall at his feet and beg forgiveness after seeing the tears of their brother, Joseph. Perhaps Joseph weeps because he knows their fear and their guilt. Maybe Joseph remembers his own pain and betrayal and does not want anyone, not even his brothers who have sinned against him, to feel that way. I've been there before Joseph might be thinking as he weeps.

He reminds them that only God is the Ultimate Judge. Justice, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation are truly acts of God.

Joseph reassures his brothers out of faith in God's providence. He tells them, "What you intended for harm, God has used for good." "So have no fear for your life or your little ones," says Joseph. God is on the side of life and goodness. Life is the purposes of God, and life will prevail. Joseph clings to a word of hope out of tragedy.

We hear this kind of trust in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not evil, to give you a future with hope." (Jer. 29:10-11) Paul writes it this way in Romans 8:28, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose."

In the same way, the parable of the unforgiving servant reminds us that we pray each week, "forgive us our debts as we forgive others." The servant who owed his lord a bazillion dollars, a debt he could never repay, was forgiven. But he did not forgive as he was forgiven. He demanded repayment of the 100 denarii, a few days' wages from the servant who begged for mercy.

We hear the famous response of Jesus to Peter's timeless question, "Lord, how many times should my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."

According to Cowart,

*Seventy times seven. Jesus uses an ancient figure of speech that means uncountable numbers of times. This word choice points us to another biblical figure that also used the term, but used it to revel in a morality the*

*opposite of Christ's. This was Lamech, descendent of the murderer, Cain. Lamech, a tribesman who lived by blood revenge. It is Lamech who boasts in the book of Genesis of the moral warrant to avenge wrongdoing with unlimited violence. In the "Song of Swords" Lamech sings, "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, Truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold."*

*Lamech's practice of settling disputes is that of seventy-sevenfold or unlimited vengeance toward ones who have wronged a life. Violence is justified. His is the way of harm, vengeance and death, not mercy and new life as with God in Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>*

The unforgiving servant quickly forgets that he had received mercy from his Lord. He forgets the extravagant mercy shown by God to him, and refuses to forgive the one who sins against him.

He forgets that he has been in the other's shoes. He forgets how the Lord has treated him.

That is why it is so important to remember. To remember the mercy of God, to recall the events of our collective past, so we can move into the future with hope prepared by God.

Will wrongs afflicted define us or refine us? Will we recall wrongdoings and sins committed against us and pray with all our hearts, and act with our whole strength to be better because indeed, you and I have been there?

Today we remember the events of September 11 when 4 hijacked planes became bombs and destroyed lives in New York, Washington, and in a field in Pennsylvania. We remember that many lives have been lost beyond our borders in the mountains and deserts of Afghanistan and Iraq, Soldier and civilian. We remember the people who have survived with trauma and courage, with brokenness and hope.

But we also remember the events of 2000 years ago when God surveyed the fields of broken lives, broken systems, and broken hearts.

God chose to call down from heaven forgiveness, not vengeance, and opened a new future with hope.

We remember that God through his own Son Jesus, the Messiah, chose

Not fear, but courage

Not violence, but healing

Not keeping score, but forgiveness

Not hate, but love

Not despair, but hope

Not death, but new life and resurrection when it looked like all was lost.<sup>3</sup>

This is why we remember. This is why we hope. This is the God we worship and serve.

God does not wish what happened to his Son on anyone.

God knows tragedy, violence, and grief firsthand and does not wish it upon any of his children.

God has been there before.

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Courtney Cowart, *An Exhortation to Forgiveness* Matthew 18:21-35 on [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org)

<sup>2</sup>IBID.

<sup>3</sup>Thanks to Dr. David Lose and his article *Faith, Forgiveness, and 9-11*, at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org) for this list of contrasts and the character of God.