

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹Then 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?" ²²Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. ²³"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, 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. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But 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.' ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Today we commemorate and remember the 10th anniversary of the horrendous acts of September 11. The horror of that day implores us to pray for the thousands who died, for their families, for the cities that were caught in terror, for our nation that was paralyzed by fear and has struggled with it ever since, and for the world that has changed in the aftermath. We pray too, for the people of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, who have felt the brunt of the US response. We pray for thousands of US soldiers who have lost their lives and for those whose lives have been forever changed. We pray for the children of the world; children are always the ones most affected by war, poverty, and violence.

Our country will never forget that day, nor should we. Our sense of security was forever altered. Our sense of invincibility and permanence was significantly challenged and deeply shaken. So, like many other national tragedies - like Pearl Harbor, we should never forget; however, as Christians, we also need to find healing ways of moving beyond just remembering. We have done a decade of that. As we remember the 10th anniversary of the attacks of September 11th, I want to believe that even though a few people truly meant us great evil, God will somehow use this evil to bring healing to all the nations.

We also need a time of national mourning - mourning for all those who continue to grieve and whom are still affected by that fateful day, as well as mourning and acknowledging that, as a country, we have killed a lot of people, many civilians, many children, and many innocents in our quest for vengeance? There is a need for cleansing, as well as healing. We have responded to acts of hate and violence with acts of violence and retaliation through the engagement of war.

As a country we have found more and more things to be afraid of, and our fears have led us down interesting paths. Maybe some of that is good. But I also worry that we've become so afraid of the "other" that we have lost the ability to judge what things are real threats.

So as a people who call ourselves Christian, who earnestly desire to be followers of the Jesus' Way, what is a Christian response to reprehensible violent acts like the attacks in New York, PA, and at the Pentagon? The Scriptures for this week point Christians to a one-word response: forgiveness.

How do people move beyond fear, beyond hatred, to places of healing and forgiveness? How do you get to the place where you can proclaim the power of love over hate, of peace over war, of unity over divisiveness, of good over evil. And perhaps a deeper theological question - Should you forgive?

Forgiveness is a continual process, and it is never easy. What I have learned about forgiveness however, is that it isn't as important about whether the one you are forgiving deserves forgiveness. Do any of us ever DESERVE forgiveness? What is important is not allowing bitterness, resentment, anger to consume your whole life by not moving toward the process of healing and wholeness and ultimately forgiveness. In the end, harboring resentment does more to hinder your progress.

Eva Kor, tells her remarkable story of growing up in Nazi Germany; she tells about Dr. Mengele, the Nazi "angel of death, in the documentary film *Forgiving Dr. Mengele*. Eva and her twin sister Miriam spent ten months in Auschwitz. Along with many other twins, they were separated from their families and subjected to Mengele's horrific experiments. After liberation by the Soviets when she was 10 years old, and 10 years in Israel, Eva moved to Indiana in 1960 and raised a family.

Eva returned to Auschwitz for the first time in 1995 for the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the camps, and on that occasion she did the unthinkable. She read aloud her personal "official declaration of amnesty" to Mengele and the Nazis. To be liberated from the Nazis was not enough, she said; she needed to be released from the pain of the past. To extend forgiveness without any prerequisites required of the perpetrators, said Eva, was an "act of self-healing." Through the act of "forgiving your worst enemy" Eva said that she experienced "the feeling of complete freedom from pain." Many Jews were outraged by her act of forgiveness. We can easily understand why.

And it becomes far too easy to label groups of people as enemies, and the next step is to label them as God's enemies. When you imagine that God hates all the people you hate, then you can be sure you've created God in your own image. German pastor Martin Niemoeller, "*God is not the enemy of my enemies; he's not even the enemy of his own enemies.*"

Ten years ago, after the attacks on Sept. 11th, Susan Retik and Patti Quigley lost their husbands on Sept. 11th. Both were pregnant with babies their fathers would never see. The two women found each other and began to grieve. They had never expected to be pregnant widows yet it was that terrible reality that connected them with widows in Afghanistan, a place that we had named as enemy. They started an organization called "*Beyond the 11th*" dedicated to helping Afghan women who were widows like themselves. As of last year they had helped more than 1,000 Afghan widows start businesses to support their families. All the work done by this organization over nine years has cost less than keeping one U.S. soldier in Afghanistan for one year. These two women sang a song not of revenge or retribution, but of new life and connection. What if, as a country, if we had joined their singing - of deep connection, of building new life, and hope after sorrow?

Frederic Luskin, co-founder of Stanford University's Forgiveness project says that forgiveness "*reduces anger, hurt, depression and stress and leads to greater feelings of optimism, hope, compassion and self confidence.*" In his book *Forgive for Good*, he writes that in forgiving we can become "*heroes instead of victims in the stories we tell.*"

What song shall we now sing? Ten years ago we sang "God, Bless America" as a fervent prayer out of our fear and brokenness. As a prayer the song sings of deep gratitude for our country "from the mountains to the prairies to the oceans white with foam." But when the song becomes a prayer for our country alone, we need to be reminded of the breadth of God's love AND forgiveness beyond our borders.

Hymn

God Bless America

As we sing "God Bless America", let us also remember that God knows no arbitrary boundaries of nationalism. We add to our prayer, God bless the World We Love, remembering that God blesses ALL peoples.

God Bless America, Land that I love.
Stand beside her, and guide her
Thru the night with a light from above.
From the mountains, to the prairies, To the oceans, white with foam
God bless America, My home sweet home.

God bless the world we love, Stranger and friend,
Go before us, restore us, With a hope that despair cannot end.
Ev'ry people, ev'ry nation, Mighty ocean, heaven's dome.
God bless the world we love, Our fragile home.
God bless the world You love, Our fragile home.