

Forgive Who?
Pentecost 14A
PPC
6 September 2020

Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-22

This next week, Thursday, is the 11th of September. Unbelievably, on that day we will mark the 19th anniversary of the destruction of the WTC in NYC, the hit on the Pentagon, and the crash of flight 93 in western Pennsylvania. At 8:46 AM, AA flight 11 hit the first tower, at 9:02 the second tower was hit by flight 175, at 9:37 flight 77 hit the Pentagon, and after incredible heroics onboard flight 93, passengers caused the hijackers to crash in a field in PA. It is thought that that flight was intended to hit either the Capital Building or the WH.

I would imagine that all of us who were old enough will never forget that fateful morning. An older woman who was a member of the church I was serving in Manhattan several years after the event recalled that she was sitting at her kitchen table that morning, eating breakfast, and when she looked out at the Twin Towers couldn't believe her eyes when the first plane hit. Less than two hours later both towers crumbled to the ground.

This horrific event has changed us personally and changed this nation indelibly. We are afraid. Our fear threatens our liberties. I can draw a straight line from that horrific morning to the heavily armed militias that now populate our states. That morning stole from us an intangible sense of control that the USA had possessed. We ruled the world. Our exceptionalism was supposed to save us from such attacks. After all, we were the Promised Land. In order to hang onto our sense of that exceptionalism we elected someone who wants to return us to that time of not feeling afraid. The

world has always been a frightening place and fear runs deep in the human psyche. Will we ever find our way home?

I'm inviting you now to join in a conversation with your fellow members as Milton separates you all into chat rooms. There are four questions I want you to discuss. These are: 1) Where were you on the morning of 9/11? 2) What were you doing? 3) What was your reaction? 4) Do you think your feelings of unease have been allayed in the past 19 years?

How do we move from the grieving and anger to the sense of hope we need to find? Recent events have not helped us in our recovery. I would imagine that all of us can remember clearly what was happening in our lives on that fateful day. I can also imagine that we remember, too, the stories of courage and care for another that emerged in the days following the horror that unfolded before our eyes.

Last week our reading from Matthew instructed us on letting go - of not holding onto those things that lead to hostility and anger directed at others. We were reminded that wherever two or more are gathered in the name of Christ, there we will be amidst love.

Immediately after this, Peter, probably thinking that he gets it and to show his understanding, asks Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" I'm sure he believed this was a very generous number. But Jesus replies, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." In other words, never stop forgiving.

Should Americans forgive the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks? Should the Japanese forgive us for dropping the only atomic bombs ever deployed on two of their

cities, destroying homes and murdering innocent women and children? Where do we draw the line?

After the 9/11 attack, Will Willimon, a Methodist bishop, wrote "Christians face particular difficulties in deconstructing the attacks. The kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world are different. Personal spiritual truths in the Bible do not translate into national public policies for a country. The good of the gospel and the glory of a nation often collide, for if Jesus is Lord, then all the pharaohs and caesars of the world are not lord."¹ Jim Wallis wrote at the time "American Christians may look back upon our response to 9/11 as our greatest Christological defeat...when our people felt vulnerable, they reached for the flag before the cross."²

What would it take for us to forgive the terrorists? What would it mean if we didn't blame the Muslim world for the terrorists that hide there? In the ensuing 19 years would so many Muslims have been attacked in this country? Would our current leadership have intentions to keep out people from Muslim countries? Would so many feel so angry still that they arm themselves so we "White" people will be protected from any lurking Muslim terrorists? Would we overlook those on the extreme right today who are actually responsible for so many attacks on protestors? Would anyone be able to claim that a 17 year old boy who murdered two and injured one at a protest was protecting our safety and that he is actually a hero?

Several years ago I read the story of Eva Kor and her twin sister. Miriam and Eva spent ten months in Auschwitz. Along with other twins, they were separated from their families and subjected to Dr. Mengele's inhumane "medical" experiments. After their

¹ Dan Clendenin at: <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20110905JJ.shtml?>

² Jim Wallis at: <http://us.mg205.mail.yahoo.com/neo/launch>.

liberation at the hands of the Soviets when she was ten years old, Eva left Eastern Europe and emigrated to Israel. Ten years after that, she married an American and re-located to Terre Haute where she raised her family.

Eva returned to Auschwitz for the first time in 1995 for the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the camps. On that occasion, she did the unthinkable. She read aloud in a public setting her personal “official declaration of amnesty” to Mengele and the Nazis. “To be liberated from the Nazis was not enough,” she publicly declared. She needed to be released from the pain of her past. To extend forgiveness without any prerequisites required from 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.

Are we required to always forgive?

God wants nothing less than our hearts - totally and completely. If we are to put our focus and our attention on God, we must let go of our anger and our fear.

The Hebrew word for “sin” - *cheyt* - actually means missing the mark. How often do we become like arrows flying wildly through the air? Arrows loosed in anger? If you’ve ever tried archery, you know how hard it is to hit the bull’s eye. You need to be disciplined and strong so that you don’t fall short of hitting the mark. Our repentance is about getting that arrow back on track until we understand that our essence is goodness and generosity and caring. When we act out in anger or judgment, we are surely loose arrows that have gone astray.

Working toward this goal of being able to forgive is a life-long process that is life-giving. The trouble is that we live in a society that encourages materialism and selfishness. Furthermore, our society sees retribution as the primary means for dealing with people who we believe have gone astray. We are more concerned with punishment, retaliation, and revenge than we are with loving. I read this week about a Black man who had spent decades in jail for stealing \$9. Would our prisons be so full if we implemented programs that actually were about rehab rather than punishment? Maybe we could actually see the kingdom at hand if we were able to let love rule our hearts.

Perhaps the hardest question of all is this: what have we, as a nation, done to other countries and the people of color in this country to make them so angry at us? Have we created or inherited a worldview that generates pain and distortion? Do we even talk about forgiveness at a national or international level? The Germans and the South Africans have been intentional about confessing their sin and making reparations for them.

Finally, let us remember the events of 2000 years ago, on a hillside outside of Jerusalem. There, on a cross, God's beloved Son, surveying a field of broken lives and desolate hearts, chose to call down from heaven forgiveness, not vengeance. In this way he made visible, if only for a moment, a future marked not by judgment but by mercy, not by despair but by hope, not by fear but courage, not by violence but healing, not by scarcity but abundance, not by hate but love, and not by death but by a new life. That's what forgiveness can do.

As we face a future that holds the possibility of hate and fear and as we remember the events of 9/11/01, may God give to all of us a palpable sense of the forgiveness we need to find in our own hearts. We must let go of fantasies of revenge, of thinking that our enemies are all wrong and we are all right. We need to work harder at removing the log from our own eye before we judge harshly the actions of others.

It will take all our faith and courage to walk into a future that is created by forgiveness. When we hear Jesus' words echo in our hearts to forgive always, we can do nothing less.

AMEN.