

## **THE PROBLEM WITH FORGIVENESS**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

September 14, 2008

Scripture: Psalm 114; Matthew 18:21-35

Thursday I remembered September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 along with everyone else in this city. But I have to tell you that it snuck up on me. Seven 9/11's have come and gone and I have come to accept the familiar routine of it, strange as that may sound. I guess I have sort of steeled myself against feeling too much about it, for fear that it might be too overwhelming to take in.

Except this year, unlike all the previous years I just couldn't get myself going Thursday morning. I was late getting to the church, and saddened as I watched on television the first of the ceremony at the site of the World Trade center. Each name was read and the age and the city and the country of those killed that day, as they are each year. But I wept this time, hearing those names, seeing those faces. I'm not sure I have done that before.

Howard Boulton's name was read and Janet Gustafson's, both of whose names are on the plaque in the hallway out there by the entrance to the sanctuary. All seven of their names were read whose names are there, even though I didn't stay home long enough to hear all of them. I finally pulled myself together and got organized for the day and set out from my apartment just as I had that first September 11<sup>th</sup> morning, to get to the church.

"We will never forget!" "We will always remember!" Those are the slogans that you see on fire trucks around the city, on bumper stickers, on large signs that appear on buildings and bill boards often displayed on the anniversary of 9/11. The promise is that we will never forget the losses we have suffered, or the people we have loved. And there is a warning in there as well; "We will never forget" "We will always remember." It's a way of saying we will be vigilant against attack in the future. We will not let this happen again. Once burned is twice shy they say, but then the World Trade Center was attacked twice, both in 1993 and in 2001, and little was done to prepare for the second time. Maybe we forgot more than we should have after the first attack.

It's interesting, in light of our promise never to forget 9/11 that this passage about forgiveness from Matthew's gospel is the lesson assigned by the lectionary on this particular Sunday after remembering once again the attack of seven years ago. The lectionary takes no heed of secular dates in history but has its own structure of Biblical stories told in liturgical sequence. So the passage from Matthew is not meant to be an answer to the promise or the warning that we will never forget the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. It is aimed more at the transgressions of one person against another than it is a guide regarding politics and war. It asks the difficult question of whether we can ever forgive and forget, and whether the former is dependent on the latter.

The Matthew passage is set in the midst of a teaching section in which Jesus has said that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, one must do so like a child. And then last week's lesson illustrated how Jesus' advises us to settle disputes in the church even

as he empowers his disciples to bind and loose in heaven what they bind and loose on earth.

Finally comes this passage about forgiveness. “How many times should we forgive one another?” someone asks. “As many as seven times?” Jesus answers, “No, seventy seven times,” or perhaps translated as it is in other versions, “seven times seventy times.” The exact number is not important, 77 or 490, the point is that it is a shockingly extravagant number, reflective of the infinite patience and forgiveness of God. Essentially, Jesus is saying that our forgiveness of others must exceed anything of which we ever imagined we were capable.

And just to nail down the point, Jesus tells a parable to illustrate what he is saying. A slave owed a king a tremendous amount of money, ten thousand talents. This was an unimaginable sum. Think of the national debt, trillions of dollars, in equivalent funds; so much money that even the Pharaoh of Egypt in his time would not be able to scrape together ten thousand talents. It was a ridiculous amount of debt, so funny that perhaps even Jesus’ followers would have laughed at the slave’s predicament. There would be no way that he could pay that much to the king to close his debts, not even if he lived a million years.

So the king, angry at the slave’s default, ordered that the slave be sold along with his wife and children and possessions in order to settle his account.

But the slave fell on his knees and begged for more time to repay the debt, promising to make good on everything if only the king would cut him some slack. And the king, impressed by the show of fear and grief, ordered not that the man be given more time, but that his debts be cancelled altogether and the record swept clean.

It’s a remarkable story of forgiveness and generosity on the part of the king who takes pity on his servant in a time when pity is all that the servant can appeal to because he has no money, no collateral, nothing with which to repay his debt. And lo and behold, the king forgives him.

It would be nice if this were the end of the story. The slave has been forgiven, the sun is shining again, the debt is wiped out, and all’s right with the world. A sweet little story about undeserved generosity, a king who is all heart and who to the delight of the slave is a terrible businessman.

You can’t run a business like this, after all. Banks can’t stay open with forgiven loans, which is why everyone has been working so hard to find a way to keep Lehman, and Fannie and Freddie afloat even at a fraction of their value.

Forgiven loans are the stuff of make believe and parables, not of real life, which is maybe what was on the mind of the slave when he left the king’s chamber. Because as he left the royal court, he was told that there was another slave who owed him a small sum of money, just a pittance, a hundred denarii, a few dollars, and this fellow was standing right outside.

Well, something must have snapped. Because the recently forgiven slave rushed outside, found the man who owed him money, grabbed him by the neck and told him to cough up his debt right then and there or he’d have to break his kneecaps. The poor man pleaded for mercy, in fact he repeated word for word what the first slave had said to the

king when he was in the same situation. But unmoved by the crocodile tears and the pleas for mercy, the first slave took the second and had him thrown into debtors prison for the trifle that he owed.

Word arrived inside the royal court about the ungrateful behavior of the unforgiving debtor and the king ordered that the man be brought back before him. When confronted with his ingratitude, and his lack of forgiveness, the first slave, who earlier had been shown boundless mercy, was sent to debtor's prison himself, and there he was tortured until he came up with his entire debt.

Jesus ends the parable by saying, "So God will do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

It is, I think, a parable about forgetting, and forgiving and about ingratitude, and how the first slave could not connect the dots between them. Jesus put it this way, "the judgment you render will be the judgment you receive."<sup>1</sup>

What the first slave who had been forgiven the national debt seems to have forgotten so quickly was that he was the recipient of so much forgiveness already. He just couldn't make the leap between the forgiveness he had received and the forgiveness he owed. As if the reduction of his debt was somehow his due, as if the king owed him that much.

There are people in life like that, people who have no sense of social responsibility, who feel that life owes them everything and whatever they get in life is only their due. They are usually very unhappy people because no amount of success or financial reward or good luck is ever enough. They are always suspicious that someone is withholding on them and usually because they are withholding on everybody else.

Over the years one of the themes about which I hear so often in counseling is the struggle that people have to forgive someone else for an injustice suffered.

It seems especially troublesome in family relationships. Some fellow feels that he's not getting as much as he should from grandma's estate. Or mom left her diamond brooch to this daughter instead of that one, and hard feelings have never healed. Or the adopted child has never felt like she had a place in the family in the same way that the biological children have.

Sometimes there is real injustice in life. A man and a woman work at approximately the same level of responsibility, and he gets promoted and she doesn't. Is it sexism or talent being recognized that lies at the core of that promotion? Depends on who you ask I suppose, but things like that just eat away at you.

And it's hard to forget the injustice you suffer if you are the injured party. C.S. Lewis once put it this way, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive." And isn't that true? It's not the idea of forgiveness that is so hard, it's forgiving that's the rub. After all we all count on forgiveness, especially in our closest relationships. What would a marriage be without forgiveness? The slights and hurts felt and received, intended or not, mount up over time and become the unspoken thing that is never resolved.

I have even seen this in the church. Some years ago, a retired banker was a member of the finance committee of a congregation I served. He was a very confident person, if you know what I mean. One night at a finance committee meeting he locked horns with a soft spoken older gentleman who had been a businessman in the telephone company. The banker was fed up with the conservative approach of the businessman, emboldened by his frustration, and shrouded in a cloud of smoke from the cigarettes he had been puffing, he banged his fist on the table and the ashtray flew into the air and turned over. The businessman was offended, got up and left the meeting, and never spoke to the banker again. Nobody knows better than church people that “Everybody says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive.”

For those of us who are Christian, the model for forgiveness is God’s forgiveness of us. We do, after all, owe a great debt to God, as the servant in the parable did, a national debt’s worth of transgression in some cases. But God has forgiven us in Jesus Christ, whatever the transgression, whatever the sin is that we think keeps us from God, it has been cancelled. It is so, not because of our worthiness, but because of God’s gracious nature. It is what a parent does for a child. Forgive, knowing that, it’s not a matter of the child’s deserving forgiveness, but a matter of God’s longing for the restoration of the relationship.

And you will no doubt ask me whether it is necessary to forget in order to forgive. Whether we have to lay aside all memory of having been harmed, or injured, or slighted in the past in order to forgive those who have hurt us.

And the answer is “no.” If someone has injured you, has taken advantage of you, harmed you, or attacked you. Of course you cannot forget that. Can we forget what happened on 9/11 or forget the monstrosity of the evil and suffering wrought by those misguided souls who drove planes into the World Trade Center, and into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and the Pentagon?

We will never forget that!

In Israel and in Palestine, I have talked with people who can never forget the injustices that been done to them. It is, in part what makes peace in the Middle East so hard to achieve. It is what makes making peace in the family and peace in the church so hard to achieve as well.

I have mentioned before hearing the story of George Sa’adeh who described to some of our group who visited Bethlehem in the Palestinian territory, how his ten year old daughter Christine was killed in Bethlehem five years ago in a terrible case of mistaken identity when Israeli IDF forces opened fire on their small car which looked like a car carrying jihadists that was right behind them. Everyone in George’s car was hit, his wife, both of his daughters, and even George took nine rounds in his body. But the worst were ten year old Christine’s fatal injuries.

Three months after the accident, George Sa’adeh, a Palestinian Christian, received a call from an Israeli woman whom he did not know. She represented a group of bereaved parents, The Parents’ Circle, composed of both Palestinian and Israeli parents who had lost children to the hostilities. The Israeli woman invited him, a Palestinian, to

join with other bereaved parents in working for peace. In time, George did, indeed, join this group and became one of its most eloquent spokespersons.

Asked if he didn't hate the soldiers who shot his daughter, and his family, George answered that what happened was an accident and that God had given him the power to forgive. "We get on with our life," he said in an interview with BBC at the time, "but it's not easy. We are all human beings - Jewish, Christian and Muslim. Losing a child is the same pain for all of us."<sup>2</sup>

George Sa'adeh has never forgotten the death of his daughter, or the injustice of it, or the pain that he feels for the loss of Christine. But he has found his way to forgiveness. Which is not the same as forgetting.

Charlotte VanOyen Witvliet of Hope College says that "Forgiveness does not involve a literal forgetting. Forgiveness involves remembering graciously." It is not forgetting the injustices and hurts and pains of life, but it is viewing them with the eyes of grace with which God views us. It remembers without contempt. It is forgiveness that does not ignore the injustices done, but that for the sake of peace, peace of mind, and peace of heart, remembers it graciously.

That is, I think, the nugget of truth inherent in the parable of the ungrateful steward, who had forgotten the enormity of forgiveness that he had received, when he exacted the harsh treatment and full repayment of another who owed him so little.

Can we forgive and forget? Well we may not be able to forget, we are after all, only human. But forgetting is not the point anyway, forgiving is. And perhaps we can forgive one another, even those who have harmed us, if we can remember *graciously*.

That may be all any of us can do this side of heaven where the enormity of God's forgiveness of us exceeds all our ability to forgive, and who to remember inspires all our forgiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> Mt. 7:2

<sup>2</sup> BBC Online news, December 22, 2005.