

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH
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SEPTEMBER 11, 2011

SERMON: FORGIVENESS – A TOUGH SERMON ON 9/11
TEXT: MATTHEW 18: 21-35

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

I have to preface this sermon. I am taking an online course in church transformation lead by our former General Minister and President, Dick Hamm. About 10 days ago, long after I had decided to preach on the lectionary text for today, there was a tele conference about the course. As a part of that tele conference some of the people talked about what they were preaching on 9/11. And someone asked, "Is anyone preaching the lectionary text?" Someone else said something to the effect, "The people who going to be looking for a new church."

This rather upset me. I don't want to look for a new job! But I am not going to run away from the words of Jesus!

Forgiveness is hard. At times I'm not sure that forgiveness is hard wired into our nature. It is something that we have to work at. It takes time. Sometimes we fail. Sometimes we don't even try. Sometimes we succeed.

Some things are easier to forgive people, golfers, for instance:

1. Being late for our tee time. (I have to do that nearly every week!)
2. Beating me. (Stephanie! - I guess now is not the time to talk about payback.)
3. Slow play.
4. Playing head games to mess up my swing.
5. Bending my putter or denting my new driver.
6. Cheating to win the game. (Almost unforgiveable.)

Some things are harder to forgive than others.

- Telling little white lies. (Because I didn't want to hurt your feelings.)
- Telling big fat black lies dripping with anger.
- Cheating on your marriage.
- Assault and battery
- Sexual assault/rape
- Top of my list: Child abuse and murder (I'm not sure which is less forgivable.)

I'll just pick one: Murder. Murder is hard to forgive. The murder of someone whom you loved is brutally hard to forgive. We've seen the TV footage of people telling the convicted murderer that he should rot in hell and that they want to be there to see him fry. There is a part of us that understands that feeling.

But we have also seen the stories about people who have forgiven the perpetrators of horrible crimes. Death row inmates forgiven by the victim's family. And we wonder - how do they do that - forgive someone who murdered their loved one and took away from "them" all those years and all that love? How? And when they talk about their faith then we get all quiet.

I'm not sure I know. That is to say I have never experienced forgiving someone something so horrible.

There was a teacher who molested a girl from my church and another girl, who was the daughter of a good friend. The molester was a track coach. And when I saw him give my eldest daughter a congratulatory pat on her butt after she won a race - well a part of me was willing to go to jail for what I wanted to do right then. He's in jail now,

finally. He had to molest several more girls before they locked him up and threw away the key. And my only regret is that all those girls had to go through all that.

Forgive him? Not yet. The best I have managed so far is to let go of the immediacy. I don't despise him daily. Maybe that is a part of the process. Now he only lives on when I tell this story.

But how can we forgive those who brought down the Twin Towers, downed four airplanes full of people, destroyed a major part of the Pentagon, and killed thousands of innocent people - all out of rage and ideology? How can we move beyond that?

It has been ten years and while some of that pain, grief, and anger has burned low, this anniversary has fanned the flames.

Ten years ago this very morning we watched as planes flew into the Twin Towers and the pentagon. We saw the towers fall. We saw the Pentagon in flames. We saw the wreckage of the fourth plane. We began to count our losses and ask "Who did this?"

How do we forgive something like that???

As your pastor I have to reach above my human feelings and tell you that I think it begins when we stop concentrating on our loss, our grief, and our suffering and begin to concentrate on WHO we are.

And WHO are we? Jesus tells us. We are: forgiven. Forgiven by his death on the cross. That's who we are: God's forgiven.

Peter came to Jesus asking for a ruling on how many times he had to forgive someone. As many as seven times? Depending on your translation, Jesus' answer was either seventy-seven or seven times seventy. Either way the number was so large as to be impossibly large. Can you imagine keeping records on your smart phone of every time you were hurt - person by person, year after year, recording the dates and times and pertinent details. Some of us would have to get smarter smart phones with lots more memory! And then one day you would hit the lotto and you would be able to refuse to forgive a person who had exceeded their quota. It would probably be a family member - who else upsets us that much but stays in our life that long???

Then Jesus told that parable. The one about forgiveness.

The king wished to settle accounts. He called in a servant who owed him a lot of \$\$ and demanded payment. The servant and his entire family were sentenced to be sold along with all their possessions. But the servant fell on his knees and begged for mercy. The king released him and forgave his debt.

Good kings can do things like that.

But soon afterward the forgiven servant found a lesser servant who owed him a bit of money...and demanded payment. The man begged for mercy but the forgiven servant had none and threw him into prison until his debt was paid in full.

Gossip happened. The rest of the servants got word to the king. The king was angry. The king's trickle-down mercy had not worked!!

The king said: "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

It does not pay to make the king angry!

But listen up! Jesus makes the point painfully clear: "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

But, but, but...we aren't refusing to forgive someone of a lesser debt! 9/11 is a huge debt! Look at what they did to us.

But Jesus isn't looking at them. Right now he is looking at us. At how his forgiven servants are going to treat others.

Are "the forgiven" really expected to forgive things like 9/11, the Holocaust, the Inquisition, and the Roman Persecutions, and such??? Isn't there some kind of limit that will let us off the hook? Jesus could have said, "Except for King Herod, Ponius Pilate, and anyone who calls himself Caesar." But Jesus did not.

I imagine myself standing with my hands outstretched right and left. With my right hand I'm holding on to Jesus, who has forgiven me. With my left hand I have a death grip on all of those people whom I cannot forgive for their crimes against me and mine.

There I stand on a tight rope over a deep dark pit. I know it is not a place I can stay. I know that I have to choose. Between clinging to our hatreds and angers...or to cling to Jesus.

I'm not sure I know how to do what Jesus commands...but I know I have to try. And not just pretend to try.

Maybe I can start by praying for my enemies. Praying that God's love will find a way into their cold, hard, murderous hearts. That doesn't sound much like a gracious prayer, does it? Doesn't sound like my heart is really in it!

I feel like the Prophet Jonah, who was called to preach God's salvation to his bitterest enemies. He didn't want to. He ran away from it. And when he had no other choice - he gritted his teeth and nearly bit his tongue as the words came out. And afterward he was mad with God for making him do it.

But God was pleased. It took a lot of pushing but Jonah chose God over hate.

Will we please God? Will God's forgiven children be forgiving?