

GRACE AND REMEMBRANCE
Sermon, September 11, 2011
Text: Matthew 18:21-35

It's hard to believe it has been ten years to the day when nineteen hijackers of the terrorist group al-Qaeda commandeered four commercial passenger jet airliners. The murderers intentionally crashed two of the airliners into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, killing everyone on board. Both buildings collapsed within two hours, destroying nearby buildings and claiming nearly 3,000 lives. The hijackers crashed a third airliner into the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C. The fourth plane crashed into a field near in rural Shanksville, Pennsylvania after some of its passengers and flight crew attempted to retake control of the plane, which the hijackers had redirected toward Washington, D.C to target the White House. There were no survivors from any of the flights. I vividly remember the Presbyterian Women having their Fall Coffee that morning, and we set up televisions to follow what was going on. Many of us were glued to our television screens and saw the collapse of the World Trade Center as it happened. It is a sight we will never forget. *And we shouldn't.* The overwhelming majority of casualties in all four attacks were civilians, including nationals of over ninety countries. This wasn't just an attack on America, this was an attack on civilization. Included among those 3,000 victims that day were 421 responders, firefighters and police personnel, who had come to rescue people from the terrorist attacks. Ten years later, that toll is estimated to have reached well over nine hundred due to traumatic injuries and illnesses directly attributable to the toxicity and hazardous materials inhaled by many. Many believe this to be a conservative figure. Over nine hundred people! Killed for trying to help. They deserve to be remembered. As do the 6,236 men and women who died in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, giving their lives in the service of freedom seeking to keep us safe from terror. We forget, and we dishonor their memory.

I'm told that the first four Sunday televised games of the 2011 NFL season were specifically chosen to remember the events of 9/11. At 1:00 there is a game between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Baltimore Ravens; midway between those two cities is Shanksville, PA, the site of the crash of flight 93, which the terrorists had destined for the White House. They will be remembered during ceremonies of that game. At 4:15 there is a game between the New York Giants and the Washington Redskins, played only a few miles from the site of the Pentagon plane crash/attack. There is also a game between the Carolina Panthers and Arizona Cardinals, which will feature ceremonies honoring Pat Tillman, the Cardinals player who left a lucrative pro-football career to join the military after the 9/11 attacks and was killed in action in Iraq. Finally the Dallas Cowboys will play the New York Jets just across the Hudson River in full view of where the Twin Towers fell. The horrific events of this day ten years ago will be remembered at these games.

It is ironic, even providential, that our lectionary reading from the Gospel today is about forgiveness. To be clear, though, forgiveness is not simply sentimental tolerance, a continually looking the other way, a formula to become a doormat for those who are bent on destruction and evil, and/or whose only interest is their own. Even in this text, forgiveness seems to have a pre-condition: REPENTANCE. Asking for mercy. Without repentance on the part of the offender, forgiveness can degenerate into a condoning acceptance and an enabling of the worst kind. Commenting on this text from Matthew, New Testament scholar Douglas Hare warns against confusing forgiveness with sentimental toleration by "forgiving too much too quickly." He writes, "*The misbehavior of alcoholics is not to be laughed off. Ministers who fail to control their sexual impulses are not to be lightly excused. Teenagers who betray their parent's trust are not simply to be forgiven; a much more loving course of action is to insist that they amend their behavior so they can regain trust. Premature forgiveness is an easy way out that does little to help.*" And terrorists who ruthlessly take innocent human life are not to blithely forgiven or tolerated, they are to be stopped, neutralized. Life is sacred, and those who trifle with innocent lives are not to be put up with. We are not to repay evil with evil, though. We are not to hate. Ann Lamott wrote that resentment is like feeding yourself rat poison, and then waiting for the rat to die. That's not the way it works. Herman Wouk's classic sequel to *The Winds of War* was entitled *War and Remembrance*. Well, we are to be about Grace and Remembrance. Gracious, ready to forgive, yes, but we are to remember. Where there is repentance and sorrow on the part of the offender, forgiveness is our obligation. But beware of forgiving too much too quickly, especially when there is no repentance on the part of the offender(s).

In our Gospel reading today, Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, how many times do I have to forgive someone who sins against me? Is seven times enough?" As if to say, "I mean, mercy and grace are certainly admirable, Lord, but shouldn't there be limits?" Actually, Peter was being quite generous here; the rabbinical standard of the day said three was plenty. If you have forgiven someone three times who requests forgiveness for the same offense, then that was enough, you didn't have to put up with the offender any more. But Jesus said, "Peter, how about *seventy seven* times?" As if to say, "If you're counting how many times you have to forgive, then there's something about grace and mercy you just don't understand."

Jesus then told the parable. Once there was a king who discovered a trusted servant owed him ten thousand talents. Now, that's a lot of money! One talent was worth six thousand denarii; a denari was a day's wages. So it took a normal working person about fifteen years to earn just *one* talent. If you owe the king ten *thousand* talents, that means you are in trouble ... that's 150,000 years' wages! To put that debt in a bit more perspective: In 5 BC, King Herod only took in nine *hundred* talents in total tax revenue from the entire country, and that was considered exorbitant, oppressive and excessive. Here this servant owes the king more than *ten times* that amount. This is a huge debt incurred by one man. How does one get in that kind of debt, unless you're working for the federal government? Maybe he defrauded the king. Perhaps he cooked the books; maybe he's a royal embezzler. Or maybe he's a distant ancestor of Bernie Madoff. We don't really know, but the bottom line is the money's gone, and this man is in huge, overwhelming, impossible debt. Life as he knew it is now over for him and his family. He's about to be publicly disgraced, his family is probably going to be sold into indentured servitude, and he's going to jail for a long, long time. So the servant threw himself down at the feet of the king, begged for patience, saying, "*If you just give me a little bit of time, I'm sure I can repay it all.*" Now, there is just no way he'll be able to repay. The king knew that. But he had pity on the servant, and decided to simply forgive the debt, to blot it out, to wipe the slate clean.

This, in a nutshell, is the gospel. You and I owe God more than we could ever repay. We owed Him that because we sinned against Him, even though He trusted us with freedom and responsibility and great riches of blessings, more blessings than we can count. But God decided to forgive the debt. But know that mercy, especially of this magnitude, isn't free. It's costly. If the debt is real, it must be paid somehow. If you owe me one hundred dollars, and I forgive that debt you owe me, that means I am one hundred dollars poorer. My mercy dismisses the \$100 debt, but I must pay it. The huge debt of our sin is real, and it *was* paid for. On the cross Jesus Christ uttered the final words on our debt to God when He said, "Father, forgive." He paid the debt with His life. This is where the discussion about forgiveness has to begin, Peter. It does not begin with how merciful you have to be with those who hurt you, but with how merciful God has been to you. In His mercy God has forgiven your debt. Not because you deserve to have the debt forgiven; God did it out of His love and mercy. He knows what you have done, and what you have left undone. He knows and still He has chosen to forgive your sins. He allows you to have a truly fresh start, a clean slate; He wipes the debt clean. If we don't genuinely appreciate the mercy we've been given, then we will never become merciful ourselves. In fact, according to Jesus, a pretty accurate measure of how much of God's forgiveness you've taken to heart can be seen in your response to those who are in need of your mercy.

The servant who had been forgiven so much from the king went out from his presence, and the very first thing he does is go right to a man who owed him a hundred denarii, a small fraction of the sum he had owed the king. But this servant grabbed the man by the throat and demanded his hundred bucks. The poor man couldn't pay it, he begged for mercy, but the servant wouldn't hear of it and he threw the man into debtor's prison. When the king heard about that, he was furious! He took the ungrateful servant and threw him into prison where he remained, for all intents and purposes, forever. Then Jesus looked right at Peter and the other disciples and said, "This is how my Heavenly Father will treat each of you who does not forgive your brother [or your sister] from your heart."

If that doesn't unnerve us, then we aren't paying attention! Jesus finds it inconceivable that we are still wondering how many times we have to forgive in light of the huge debt we've been forgiven. You cannot hear the words "*In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven,*" and take them to heart without becoming a changed person, a gracious person, a merciful person. Each week we pray, "*Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" After Jesus taught the disciples that prayer, He also said, "*If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your heavenly father forgive your trespasses.*"

As we unite in prayer in a few moments, let us remember it is our business as Jesus' disciples to remember, and it is also our business to be gracious. (*The attached litany was in our bulletin inserts that morning:*)

A LITANY of READINGS AND PRAYER

Adapted from the original prepared ten years ago after the tragic events of September 11, 2001

Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

FROM THE RISING OF THE SUN TO ITS SETTING, MY NAME IS GREAT AMONG THE NATIONS, SAYS THE LORD OF HOSTS.

Praise the Lord.

THE NAME OF THE LORD BE PRAISED.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah:

Isaiah 40:28 - 31

ETERNAL GOD, IN YOUR SIGHT NATIONS RISE AND FALL, AND PASS THROUGH TIMES OF PERIL. EARNESTLY WE ASK YOU TO LOOK WITH FAVOR UPON OUR LEADERS: THE PRESIDENT AND VICE-PRESIDENT, MEMBERS OF THE CABINET AND CONGRESS, ALL MILITARY OFFICERS, AND ALL OTHERS IN POSITIONS OF AUTHORITY. GUIDE THEM WITH THE SPIRIT OF WISDOM, GOODNESS AND TRUTH, AND SO RULE THEIR HEARTS THAT JUSTICE AND PEACE, LAW AND ORDER, INTEGRITY AND HONOR MAY PREVAIL.

A reading from Lamentations:

Lamentations 1:12, 2:11, 3:21-26, 31-32

ALMIGHTY GOD, FATHER OF MERCIES AND GIVER OF COMFORT: DEAL GRACIOUSLY, WE PRAY, WITH ALL WHO SUFFERED IN THESE TRAGIC EVENTS AND THE ENSUING CONFLICTS ABROAD; THAT, CASTING THEIR CARE ON YOU, THEY MAY KNOW THE CONSOLATION OF YOUR LOVE.

Let us pray for the families and loved ones of all those who suddenly, unexpectedly, tragically departed this life.

[SILENCE]

Let us pray for those who have been seriously injured, for all who are troubled by pain, confusion and recurrent terror, for all in need of healing, for all who suffered loss. [SILENCE]

Let us pray for all who practice the healing arts, for all who labored to rescue survivors and restore order, for all military personnel who serve diligently to restore, maintain and preserve peace. [SILENCE]

INTO YOUR HANDS, O GOD, WE COMMEND ALL FOR WHOM WE PRAY, TRUSTING IN YOUR WISDOM AND MERCY, THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD, AMEN.

A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew:

Matthew 5:43-45

AS OUR LORD COMMANDS, DEAR GOD, WE ALSO PRAY FOR ALL WHO PLANNED, PERPETRATED OR ENDORSED THESE EVIL, CRUEL AND DESTRUCTIVE ACTS UPON THE INNOCENT. WE COMMEND THEM TO YOUR POWERFULLY CREATIVE, GRACIOUSLY SAVING, AND MERCIFULLY JUST HANDS. MAY THOSE WHO REMAIN IN THIS WORLD COME TO KNOW THE LIGHT OF YOUR TRUTH, THE REALITY OF YOUR LOVE, AND THE POWER OF YOUR GRACE. MAY THEY LEARN TO LOVE MERCY, DO JUSTICE AND WALK HUMBLY WITH YOU, THE ONE TRUE GOD.

A reading from the epistle to the church in Rome:

Romans 14:7-9, 10b-12

O GOD, YOUR LOVE CARES FOR US IN LIFE AND WATCHES OVER US IN DEATH. MAKE US STRONG TO COMMIT OURSELVES, AND THOSE WE LOVE, TO YOUR UNFAILING CARE. IN OUR PERPLEXITY, HELP US TO TRUST. IN OUR FEAR, FILL US WITH YOUR PERFECT LOVE.

A reading from the Gospel according to John

John 14:1-3, 27

GRACIOUS LORD OF LORDS, KING OF KINGS, PRINCE OF PEACE, WONDERFUL COUNSELOR, MIGHTY GOD: WE COMMEND OUR NATION TO YOUR MERCIFUL CARE, IN ORDER THAT WE MAY LIVE SECURELY IN PEACE, UNITY, STRENGTH, REVERENCE AND HONOR. GIVE ALL IN AUTHORITY THE GRACE TO PERCEIVE YOUR GOOD AND PERFECT WILL, AND GRANT THEM THE RESOLVE TO DO IT. GIVE WISDOM TO OUR LEADERS, AND STEADFASTNESS TO OUR PEOPLE.

CHOIR ANTHEM

"A PRAYER FOR PEACE"

Kathy Lowe Hart

O God, whose mercy never ends, we pray for wars to cease, That hatred be abandoned, replaced with love and peace,
If we could still our voices, would we hear your lament about the world condition, the cruel, sad events?
We pray that every nation will live in Your embrace, resolving the differences of country, creed and race.
We lift up all Your peoples, Muslims, Christians, Jews – and ask that brotherhood prevail, a higher call to choose.
O God Whose mercy never fails, help us to find Your way. Give us the strength and courage for living every day.
O grant this world Your blessing, and lead us through the night of earthly darkness and distress to Your eternal Light.
From darkness and distress to Your eternal light.

HASTEN THE COMING OF YOUR KINGDOM, O GOD, THAT YOUR WILL MAY BE DONE ON EARTH, AS IT IS IN HEAVEN. HEAR US AS WE PRAY, AS JESUS TAUGHT US, "OUR FATHER..." (*The Lord's Prayer; trespasses*)