

September 11, 2011

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19A)

Matthew 18:21-35

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Forgiveness and Power

What we are doing today is remembering the events of ten years ago and considering their continuing significance. Our music moves from the haunting and almost mournful *Adagio for Strings* to the affirmation of God's love in our final hymn. We've altered the prayers for today and are all invited to a plenary Sunday School forum. But it is also important that what we are doing is what we always do: gathering around the Table for transformation, sustenance, challenge and the assurance that we are a forgiven people.

Our reading from scripture puts forgiveness front and center. And not just forgiveness of the kind that leads to reconciliation, but forgiveness of those who believe they neither need our forgiveness, nor whom appear to want it, let alone look for reconciliation. Forgiveness is a tricky, tricky thing and more often than not takes time as every one of us is a 'work in progress' so our forgiveness of others is often incomplete on any given day. It is just such forgiveness that Jesus is talking about to Peter. He has laid out a process of going to a person who has offended against you one on one and if that doesn't work take witnesses, and if that doesn't work take it to the church. If that doesn't work, let it go.¹ Peter wants to know how many times he has to forgive and Jesus says "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Why? Why is forgiveness so important when there is no reasonable and holy hope for reconciliation in this world or in our lifetime? The answer has something to do with *power*. Just as he did when he gave Peter the keys to the kingdom², so when he talks of forgiveness he says "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."³ When we do not forgive, we are bound in some sense, less than free, in the thrall of another person or power.

Have you ever had a personal enemy -- someone out to get you, destroy your life or your livelihood or your marriage, someone who is after your job and starts a whispering campaign in the office? Then you know what it is like to be in the thrall of another. Have you ever been put in the position of being a scapegoat, taking the blame for some wrong that you did not commit? Then you know what it is like to be in the thrall of another. Have you ever been humiliated, perhaps raped or robbed, and resented your oppressor and thought about revenge? Then you know what it is to be in the thrall of another. When we give some other person power over our thoughts, our imagination, our life in

¹ 18:15-17

² 16:19

³ 18:18

such ways then we are not free and we simply *must* figure out how to forgive, or at least begin the process of trying to want to forgive. Some hurts are deeply personal and so it was and still is to some degree for those who lost people they loved on September 11 ten years ago. It is deeply personal for those first responders and volunteers who lost their health as a result of their compassion and their work in those early hours and days. There are others who are burdened by the guilt that survivors sometimes carry and along with it, a hatred of those who perpetrated the evil that was done on that fateful day. Everyone of us and others throughout the world have found our lives changed, often inconvenienced when we travel, an uninvited sense of fear, perhaps, or loss of a natural sense of security and safety in some circumstances of our lives. What happens to us, if we are not alert to what is going on in our souls or spirits is that we can find ourselves nurturing grievance and allowing stony-hard lumps of hatred to grow in our hearts. This is a process that by-passes our intellect and our reason.

When I think about my own reactions in life I think “Of course I don’t hate Muslims and know that Islam is a religion of peace,” but I can find my bile rising when I see the smug and hateful assurance of any kind of fundamentalist who is trying to impose a view of the world that I believe oppressive and that I do not share. It might happen when I am listening to a Christian who thinks that evolution or global warming are a hoax, or a different kind of fundamentalist who will hold our entire economy hostage to a vision and set of principles that they wish to impose -- whatever the cost -- on everyone else. Such was the work of many of the demagogues who used violence to impose their wills on others, including the revolutionary communists and indeed the Muslim fundamentalists who believe that they must impose their vision of Islam as the ‘last word of God’ so that everyone can live under their version of Islamic states and so be free. Their passion is fueled by resentments, often legitimate ones. It has been proposed that Islamic fundamentalism that espouses violence was born in the torture rooms of Egyptian prisons under the government of Anwar Sadat, a man seen as betraying the Arab cause and the kind of Muslim that would allow converse with democratic and western societies.⁴ I may not think that hate is infecting my spirit, but it probably is and so is becoming part of the cycle of violence that seems stoppable only by a savior.

Well, we have one. And he says ‘forgive.’ Unbind yourselves from all that resentment of injuries deep and shallow, lay down your hatred which may have become a comfortable friend and shaped your political and personal choices, opinions and beliefs, but is really a ways in which you have give up your power to another and put yourself, perhaps without knowing it, in the thrall of your enemy. Jesus goes on to tell a parable of the cycle of violence that ensues when we turn our backs on the reality of forgiveness where the forgiven servant offers no such forgiveness to others and ends up in a prison of his own making.

All well and good but the forces of wickedness that rebel against the ways of God are powerful, and the idea of forgiving someone who not only believes he has no need of forgiveness but has every intention of continuing to act in ways that require us to forgive

⁴ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the road to 9/11* (Vintage Random House, 2006) p.34ff.

seems insane. None of us want to be doormats in the name of Christ. When Jesus counseled us to 'turn the other cheek,' he was counseling non-violent resistance that would show the actions of the oppressor for what it was. Whenever we renew our baptismal covenant we promise that we will persevere in resisting evil, presumably in ourselves *and* in others.

Forgiveness, in an imperfect world, does not mean pretending that things are other than they are. Forgiving another person is particularly hard because it requires naming the actions that need forgiveness. When we think about 9/11, that means looking head on at the insanity of a closed theological system, a destructive force for evil, and naming it for what it is: something to be resisted with every fiber of our beings because it dehumanizes everyone in the name of alleged freedom and perverts a religion of peace. The hijackings and killings of that day were both criminal and acts of war. Our response, especially when it is a violent response that seeks to find and kill those who make no secret of their plotting further atrocities against us, must be a sober and somber one, recognizing the reality of sin. In heaven there will be no prisons, but here there have to be means of regulating the behavior of those who cannot regulate their own. There will be no war in heaven, but here the forces that would invade and enslave in the name of freedom must be resisted.

I have told you in the past of a lunchtime conversation years ago at the Yale Divinity School in which we wondered whether the German resistance were right to plot to kill Hitler. Some said killing and murder is always wrong and nothing justifies it. Others said that the prevention of evil made killing Hitler not only right but a good thing to do. I believed then as I do now that the attempts to kill Hitler were brave and wise, but that they are still actions in need of forgiveness in a sinful and broken world. So it is with many of the decisions we make and actions we take in a sinful and broken world. I am glad that Osama bin Laden and many of the leaders of Al-Qaeda have been found and killed. (And I find myself shocked to be saying that.) I believe that these deaths are necessary in a war. But I also know that our drones engender collateral damage way beyond the civilians that we kill -- damage that will fuel resentment of us and our ways for generations to come. This is neither chess nor football and so not an arena for triumphant glee. The cycle of violence will continue and however necessary we believe our actions to be, we are participating in the sinfulness of a broken world and are as much in need of forgiveness as anyone else.

I really don't know what forgiving our enemies means while we are trying to kill and defeat them. But it means at least this: that we won't spend our whole lives plotting revenge and we won't be gleeful about sin, and we won't let the actions of the misguided make us never again enter a tall building or befriend a Muslim. Forgiving our enemies at the very least means we do whatever we have to do to contain them without fist pumping, without returning hatred with hatred and evil with evil, and without claiming that doing what we believe necessary is therefore right in the sight of God.

This is a hard gospel and I'm aware that this can sound unpatriotic in some way. I'm reminded of the Serviced of Thanksgiving that Archbishop Robert Runcie presided over after the Falklands war in the early 1980s. He was saying things like 'we must pray for

our enemies' and Margaret Thatcher, the then Prime Minister got rather shirty (as she could) and accused him of not celebrating the triumph of British forces over Argentinean invaders. I appreciate and value the sacrifice, skill and courage of those who serve to protect the real freedoms that we enjoy in this county -- not least the freedom to worship without fear. We can take pride in the democracy we enjoy here, in the courage of our troops and the persistence of our intelligence community -- but it is forgiveness, not seven but seventy seven times that is the source of such reasonable and holy hope as we can muster because we have been forgiven. Striving to forgiving those who do us wrong over and over again, even as we act to prevent our being victimized by further wrongdoing; and seeking forgiveness continually for the wrong that we do, mean that forgiveness is a gift that frees us from the power of the enemy and allows us to live secure in God's love for us and for all of creation.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

AMEN