

SERMON SEPTEMBER 11TH 2010.
MATTHEW 18: 21-35.

Today on this day when we have just heard in our gospel, Jesus challenge of forgiveness, it is also the tenth anniversary, of the terrible tragedies of September 11th when the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre were attacked and when two other planes crashed as the result of hijacking.

These tragedies are examples of those devastating world events, when we can remember where we were when it happened, we can all remember the gut wrenching images of the Twin Towers, as they teetered and then fell. Unimaginable tragedies piled one upon another, with a plane crashing into the Pentagon and another into a Pennsylvania field. Before night fell, the nineteen highjackers had killed 2, 973 people and sent out waves of grief around the world.

Once again our screens have again been dominated with news videos of those events ten years ago. The carnage that occurred through the day of September 11th 2001 gouged a deep wound in not just the psyche of America, but in many parts of the world. Ten years later the wound hasn't healed, there's still a war in Afghanistan, we've had the war in Iraq, and of course the London bombings.

The pain remains

And today we hear Jesus' parable of grace and forgiveness. How do we read such words in the light of 9/11.

Lets look again, at this parable, that came in answer to Peters question, " Lord how many shall I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy- seven times."

Jesus goes on to tell the story of a king who wants to settle his accounts with his servants. A particular man is brought before him who owes a great deal of money, and there's no way he can repay it. Because he cannot repay it the servant is told he must, otherwise he and his wife and children, and all he owed should be sold. Which would make him not a servant, but actually a slave.

The servant fell on his knees and begged, if the king is patient he would pay the debt. But the king took pity on him, and cancelled the debt.

The servant went out he found one of his fellow servants who owed him money. He roughs him up and demands that, this chap repays him. The man asks for the servant to be patient, but he refuses. He has his fellow servant thrown in jail.

Then the king hears about the treatment the first servant gave to his fellow worker and had him thrown into prison and tortured until he is able to pay the full account back.

The parable ends with the Jesus saying, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister.”

I guess we are like the first debtor in many ways.

The first debt was so great that it was impossible to pay.

In interpreting this parable and realising, that we cannot possibly repay God for all he has done to us. God has not only given us life, but continues to love us and want what is best for us when many of our actions fall short of the glory of God. Our sins mount up higher and higher until there is no way out.

But through faith in Jesus and his forgiveness, we can repent, turn back from our sins, and find the debt has been cancelled.

But we behave like the servant that showed no mercy, we go expecting everyone else to pay for the hurts they have caused us.

Jesus’ point is well made. God has forgiven each of us so much that we should go out to forgive others. But aren’t some acts too great to forgive? We may ask, on this day of all days, we know what hatred within the human heart can lead to.

And this one day does not stand alone does it. World history is packed to the brim with acts of evil, even within living memory, the fields of Cambodia, the genocide in Rwanda.

Once we are taught to demonize those w hate, then any act can be justified, the death camps in Germany are an example of this.

In our home group, before we broke up for the summer, for a couple of weeks we talked a little about how as humans, its so easy for us to demonize, ‘the other’ those different from us, ‘the alien to our normality’. The Refugee, the homosexual, the gypsy, the economically disadvantaged, who should get of their backsides and work, the ‘feral underclass.’ who took part in the riots two weeks ago.

(Of course no one talks about ‘our feral’ Members of Parliament who lie about their expenses)

Its part of our humanity and we have to be very weary of it, because Hitler new the power of demonizing ‘the other.’

No one is immune to learning hatred.

Those Highjackers had been fed a steady diet of hate. They were consumed by hate, which led to the terrible atrocity of the destruction of the Twin Towers. So are their crimes so evil that we just can’t forgive, and isn’t asking people to forgive them, to much to ask.

Well first scripture teaches us that judgement is for God alone.

Second we are to forgive as we have been forgiven.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans he writes “Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement of God”

Each one of us is accountable for our actions before God. We are not accountable for the injury done to us, but for the reaction to that hurt.

We are however accountable for the actions we do in reaction to the pain caused.

Jesus, who taught us to pray “ Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” called out from the cross, “ Father forgive them for they know not what they do”. Yet forgiveness can be so difficult. This is true at the global scale with an act like the terrorist that many people are remembering today. And forgiveness can cut just as deep for those not directly touched by 9/11, who wonder if they can forgive a father who committed incest, a business partner who stole money, and too many other private tragedies to name.

But as one commentator on this passage has said, “Yet not forgiving, means holding on to the hate. Not forgiving someone is like drinking poison in the hope the other person will die.”

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I would to share a moving story of forgiveness, from an atrocity that happened over forty years ago, many here will remember this image of the Vietnam war, after a village has been attacked by napalm, the girl in the middle is Phan Thi Kim or Ann Ti. She has ripped of her flaming clothing.

Many of you will remember Ann Ti, as the child who after her village had been bombed with napalm ran naked after taking her burning clothes off, it was one of the most unforgettable images from the Vietnam war.

I read of the account from the book *'The lost art of forgiving,'* written by Johann Christoph Arnold.

John lives the quiet life of a Methodist pastor in a sleepy Virginia town these days, but things weren't always so. A helicopter pilot during the Vietnam war, he helped organize a napalm raid on the village of Trang Bang in 1972- a bombing immortalized by the prize-winning photograph of one of its victims Phan Thi Kim, (Ann Ti).

For twenty-four years, his conscience tormented him. He badly wanted to find the girl to say he was sorry-but he could not.

Then in an almost unbelievable coincidence, on Veterans Day 1996 John met Kim at the Vietnam Memorial. Kim had come to Washington, D.C .to lay a wreath for peace.

In a speech to the crowd Kim said she was not bitter. Although she suffered immensely from her burns, she wanted people to know that had suffered even more. "Behind that picture of me, thousands and thousands of people...died.

Kim went on to say that she forgave the men who had bombed her village, and that although she could not change the past, she now wanted to promote peace." John beside himself, pushed through the crowds and managed to catch her attention before she was whisked away by a police escort He identified himself as the pilot responsible for bombing her village twenty years before, and they were able to talk for two short minutes.

John said, " Kim saw my grief, my pain, my sorrow.....She held out her hand and embraced me. All I could say was 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry-over and over again, And at the same time she was saying 'It's alright, I forgive you.'

John maintains that the forgiveness he has received is a gift-not something earned or even deserved. It is, finally a mystery: he still can't quite grasp how a two minute talk could wipe away a twenty-four year nightmare,"

God became human in Jesus Christ. He lived among us, not just teaching about love, but more importantly, showing us the love of God. Jesus chose to show power through his powerlessness on the cross.

Jesus continually gave the example of turning the other cheek, of offering mercy, love, and forgiveness.

God came in Jesus and offered us the redemptive power of the cross. He also gave us a pattern for how humans can live godly lives.

Through the good news of the gospel, there is hope that we may somehow, find the courage and the strength within us to embrace Jesus' words, to take up the cross and live differently, and when we do this each day the power of violence, revenge, retribution and division will be broken. Amen.