

Proper 19

September 11, 2011

*O God be in my mouth as I speak for you and fill this place with your great grace that we may leave this place less of what we used to be and more of what we ought to be through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*

*Peter came and said to Jesus, "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."*

While living in Florida for six years, prior to my arrival to St. Martin's, I developed a strong dislike for the football teams at Florida State, University of Florida, and Miami University.

Being from Georgia, this antipathy came naturally, but part of it came from being surrounded by all those annoying fans of those other teams.

When you find yourself in the minority do you ever notice how much easier it is to feel defensive about, or to feel dislike for, someone else's political or football opinion?

Now I know that good-natured loathing for another person's football team can never compare to the hatred and evil that gave rise to the attacks ten years ago on September 11.

But my experience living in Florida (among those football heathens) did give me some insight into the way that hatred can work on the health of our human souls.

It is all too easy for us to learn hatred, to let resentment build because we feel persecuted, or isolated by our own loyalties.

How far hatred can carry the human heart was made clear ten years ago, at 8:46 AM, when American Airlines Flight 11, loaded with fuel became a guided missile, slamming into the North Tower of the World Trade Center.

As firefighters and policemen rushed to the aid of those who had been injured, and the city begin to understand the scope of what had happened, another airliner slammed into the second tower.

Unimaginable tragedies piled one upon another with another plane crashing into the Pentagon, another into a Pennsylvania field.

The Twin Towers fell and before the night was over, nineteen hijackers had killed 2,973 people and sent out waves of grief around the world.

The hijackers had been fed a steady diet of hate. They were consumed by that hate and that hate fed a desire to attack our country in act of terror that was more important than their own lives.

The devastation of that morning tore a deep wound in our national psyche. Ten years later the wound has not completely healed.

We fought back against the Taliban, and then Saddam Hussein and those who supported him. Seal Team Six took out Osama Bin Laden, the man behind the terror.

Yet none of these actions seems to have brought healing. The surface is scarred over.

The pain remains for so many people, especially for those that lost loved ones on that terrible day.

On this day, when we remember the terrible damage that unbridled hatred can do, God calls us to bring our collective pain, our anxiety, and fear to the altar.

And on this day of days, we hear from our appointed readings a scripture of mixed messages. From Exodus, we get the story of the children of Israel at the Red Sea.

The Lord drives back the water, the people cross on dry land and then Pharaoh and his army are drowned.

The Lord has triumphed gloriously, the horse and rider has been thrown into the sea. The wrath or power of God seems appropriate on a day like today. Good destroys evil. Charlton Heston beats Yul Brynner.

On this day, though, we also hear another perspective, Jesus' parable of grace and forgiveness. Jesus tells of a man who is not simply in debt, he faces an impossibly large mountain of money to repay.

One Biblical scholar has calculated that King Herod's annual income from all his territories and tax collectors was a mere 900 talents per year. 10,000 talents would exceed all the taxes of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria combined.

The parable is hyperbole. No servant could ever amass so large a debt.

Then when the king cancels the debt, the man now free from the burden, goes out to demand payment from someone who owes him a debt equal to a hundred days wages, a much more manageable sum.

In this remarkable parable, Jesus tried to remind us, that all of us in some way are debtors.

We owe a debt to God that we cannot possibly repay. God has not only given us life, but continues to love us and want what is best for us, even when our actions fall short of what God desires.

Our sins mount up higher and higher until there is no way we could begin to atone for them.

But through faith in Jesus, faith in our Savior, we can repent, turn back from our sins and find the debt has been cancelled and our heavenly Father waits to welcome all of his prodigal sons and daughters home.

All too often, though, we are like the unforgiving servant. 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 of our way to forgive others.

But you may say, "Aren't some acts too heinous to forgive?" On this day of all days, we know how great an evil can grow within the confines of the human heart.

But my friends, this day does not stand alone. World history is packed with atrocities. Many of us have seen the killing fields of Cambodia, the death camps in Hitler's Germany, or the genocide in Rwanda.

We have learned, as a friend of mine wrote, that once we are taught to demonize those we hate, any act can be justified.

And so on this day, we must ask ourselves, "Is forgiving the perpetrators of September 11 too much to ask? How could those of us who remain alive even have the right to forgive?"

The answer from scripture is two-fold. *First we are taught that judgment is for God alone. Second we are to forgive as we have been forgiven.*

In the reading from *Romans*, Paul says, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or your sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God".

We are each accountable for our actions before God. We are not accountable for the injury done to us, but for our reactions to that hurt.

Not forgiving mean holding onto hate. When we make the choice not to forgive it is like, as a Christian writer once wrote, “drinking poison in the hope that the other person will die”.

The type of forgiveness that Christians are called to practice does not, of course, speak to how a nation should react when attacked by another nation, or by terrorists.

This is not meant to be an argument for pacifism.

Instead, this morning, we are reflecting together on how we might react to the very personal hurt and betrayals we have all suffered in our human lives.

Will you let the hurt fester until it distills into hate? Will you pray for the grace to forgive?

Forgiveness does not always mean forgetting and we must be honest sometimes reconciliation is not always possible.

Forgiveness means trusting judgment to God. This is only possible by the grace that comes from God alone.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it this way, “Forgiving means abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin, while we may give up our right to vengeance...it is a loss that liberates the victim”.

God became human in Jesus of Nazareth. He lived among us not just teaching us about love, but showing us by his actions the love of God.

Jesus chose to show us this power through his powerlessness on the cross. For Christians this is the only path to true love and forgiveness.

It is not easy, I admit. There will be times of frustration and times where forgiveness and reconciliation won't seem possible.

Part of living in our fallen world, though, is learning the lesson that grace from God means nothing without sacrifice.

And the only other path available to us will always end in a fiery crash of hate and despair.

So on this day of remembrance we must ask ourselves the question, “Which path will you choose to follow?”

Amen