

weak. Help the afflicted. Honor everyone.
Love and serve the Lord.”

This should be our prayer today! For Jesus told us that it is unlimited acts of love, mercy and forgiveness repeated over and over again by those who will not give in to hate or give up on love that will always overcome evil. This is what the church is called to do. It is the church’s responsibility to create a spirit of love and forgiveness in this world so that our future will be distinct from the past. Ultimately, this will create room for God’s Kingdom to come and God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. “One little word shall fell him” – forgive. Amen.



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Pasadena Community Church

September 11 - Ten Years Later

Sunday, September 11, 2011

Sermon by: Dr. Charley Reeb, Senior Pastor

It’s hard to believe this is the tenth anniversary of 9/11. Most of us remember exactly where we were and what we were doing when we heard the reports of those four unspeakable attacks on our country. I was in my car on my way to church when I heard the reports on the radio. I had to pull to the side of the road and stop. I was stunned. Needless to say, I didn’t get much done that day. Many of you were glued to your television screens and saw the collapse of the World Trade Center as it happened. It is a sight all of us will never forget.

This is a difficult day for our country. 3,000 people were killed on 9/11. Among those lost were 836 responders, firefighters and police personnel who had come to rescue people from the attacks. The overwhelming majority of casualties in all four attacks were civilians, including nationals of over 70 countries.

This is a difficult day for our country, but September 11 is particularly difficult for Christians. Why? There is a teaching from Jesus that we cannot get away from. We can’t explain it away. This teaching is seen in its simplest form in our scripture lesson for today. I don’t believe it is a coincidence that this is the assigned lectionary text for today. Sometimes we don’t pick the text but the text picks us. “Then Peter came to

Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:21-22).

We all know that forgiveness is fundamental to our faith. Christ commands us to forgive. We dare to pray every Sunday, “Lord forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” In other words, we are asking God to forgive us in direct proportion to the way we forgive others. On our best days this is a difficult teaching to hear. But on a day like this it is almost too much for us to handle.

The day after 9/11 Bishop Will Willimon saw a couple being interviewed on the news. They were standing on the street, before the wreckage of ground zero, obviously in great grief. Their beloved daughter had perished in the attacks. They shared their grief with the reporter.

The reporter stammered and said to them, “Well, I know that you will be able to go to your place of worship this weekend and there maybe you’ll find some consolation in your faith . . .” The grieving mother replied, “No, we won’t be going to our place of worship this weekend ’cause we’re Christians, and we know what Jesus

commands about forgiveness, and frankly, we're just not yet ready for that. It'll be some time before we'll want to be with Jesus" (Will Willmon, "How You Will Know if it's Jesus," Day1.org).

If we are honest, we can all relate to that mother. We are human and the last thing we feel like doing is forgiving those responsible for 9/11. We want revenge! We want to do to them what they did to us! The problem is those of us who follow Jesus don't have that choice.

There is an epitaph in a cemetery in Atlanta that a woman had inscribed on the tomb of her adulterous husband. The epitaph reads, "Gone, but not forgiven" (King Duncan, "A Difficult Day to Follow Jesus"). Some of us can relate to that emotion. In fact, this may be the emotion for many on this day. It is understandable to want revenge. It is understandable to be angry and resentful. But the truth is, if we hang on to these emotions too long they become toxic, for they are exactly the emotions that evil wants us to hold in our hearts.

Dr. M. Scott Peck, a psychiatrist, says in his book *The Road Less Traveled*, that unless we are able to forgive those who hurt us there will never be mental health in our lives and wholeness in the world. Forgiveness is not easy. And yet, King Duncan reminds us that "not forgiving can take a greater toll on us than forgiving ever could" ("A Difficult Day to Follow Jesus").

Kenneth Hart, a psychology professor at the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada studied sixty-six recovering alcoholics. The individuals had one thing in common: they were all angry with someone. Resentment ruled their lives. Teaching forgiveness, Hart found, is one way to break the cycle that causes

recovering alcoholics to relapse. If they release their anger through forgiveness, they no longer have a reason to use alcohol as an escape. One of the men studied said, "Forgiveness set me free!" (Duncan).

You know what the cross is all about? Forgiveness. On the cross, in Jesus, God forgave the sins of the world. This is why we are called to forgive. We are to forgive as we have been forgiven. Why? Because God has forgiven us.

The resounding question on this day is "How do we forgive?" In the dark of this unspeakable massacre, how do we do it? It can only be done by the grace of God. It is only when we give our pain and anger to God that we are given the courage and grace to do what is humanly impossible – forgive.

As we are empowered by God to forgive, we get to experience the overcoming power of God's love and grace. We see a glimpse of it in our text for today. So many people ask me about Jesus' response to Peter's question about forgiveness. They wonder what Jesus meant by 77 times or 70 times 7. Well, if we look closer at this phrase we see that Jesus was communicating the power of forgiveness.

Jesus was using an ancient figure of speech. However, he was using it in the opposite way that it was originally used. If you trace back this phrase you see that it was first used in the Old Testament by Lemech, a descendant of Cain (the one who murdered his brother Abel). Lemech was a tribesman who lived by blood revenge. He believed that if someone wronged him, he was justified to retaliate endlessly with unlimited violence. This is why Lemech sings in Genesis, "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, Truly Lemech seventy-

sevenfold." Lemech believed that the only way to settle conflict was through unlimited violence and bloodshed. Courtney Cowart reminds us that "it is this kind of belief about the justification of violence for the settling of moral grievances that leads to mornings like 9-11" (Courtney Cowart, "An Exhortation to Forgiveness," Day1.org).

Jesus, knowing this history, turns it around and says, "So when someone does something against you, you are not to avenge it forever, you are to forgive forever!" Your forgiveness will be unlimited, unrestrained, forever. This is God's way of eradicating sin and evil inside of us, for when would it ever stop? You hurt me and I hurt you. You hurt me and I hurt you. You hurt me and I hurt you. This would continue until the world God created self-destructed.

Christ calls us to forgive. This is what Christians do. This is who we are. Why? Because we believe "the power of God is in love and forgiveness, not in vengeance and bloodshed" (Cowart). September 11th taught us this! Have we forgotten the lessons we learned in the wake of 9/11? Has it been that long? Have we forgotten that we learned that we need each other – that we are responsible for each other – that we are connected to each other – that we need the love of God in our lives?

A friend of mine named Lindsey Alley was living in New York City at the time of 9/11. She recalls getting on the subway just a week or so after the attacks. The train was packed with people and she couldn't find anything to hold on to. She was so overwhelmed by the events of the past week that she began to cry. Standing next to her was a man she did not know. He was a big, muscular African-American man. He put his arm around her and took her

hand and said, "You just hold on to me. We have got to hold on to each other." Have we forgotten?

I loved Mr. Rogers growing up. I was raised on his TV programs. What many don't know is that Mr. Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister. Once when he was invited to deliver the Commencement address at Pittsburgh Seminary, he told a story about one of his professors there, Dr. William Orr. Fred Rogers had gone to see Dr. Orr, toward the end of his life after a stroke left him partially paralyzed, but his professor was still bright in mind and spirit. Mr. Rogers asked him about something that puzzled him for a long time. It had come up again during the Sunday morning worship service earlier that day. One of the hymns sung that morning had been Martin Luther's *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. What puzzled Mr. Rogers was the verse that says:

The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo! his doom is sure, one little word shall fell him.

"Dr. Orr," Fred Rogers asked, "what is the one little word that will fell the prince of darkness? That one word Luther claimed would strike down evil?" After a quiet moment, the professor answered, "Forgive. The word is forgive. Forgiveness is the only thing evil cannot tolerate" (Christianity Today, March 2000).

Immediately after 9/11 the Washington National Cathedral held a national service of mourning. When the people were dismissed from the service this is the prayer that was used:

"Go forth into the world in peace; Be of good courage; Hold fast to that which is good. Render to no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint hearted. Support the