

Sermon for September 13, 2020
 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
 Sermon Texts: Exodus 15: 1b-11, 20-21 and Matthew 18: 21-35
 1st Sermon Title: *“Forgiveness is not natural”*

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Lord, we come into your presence this morning to give you all praise and all glory. We seek to understand your mercy and your forgiveness, and to model those characteristics in our own behavior. Forgiveness is not easy or natural to us, but you give us so many examples in scripture where forgiveness brings us into fellowship with one another and into right relationship with you. Grant us the courage to forgive those who have hurt us and sinned against us. Amen.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION: God of mercy, your faithfulness to your covenant frees us to live together in the security of your powerful love. We are free to love our enemies. Amid all the changing words of our generation speak your eternal Word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises by living in faith and obedience, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Even though we are in the middle of a pandemic, and our lives are changed and may be changed for a very long time, it’s hard for me, as I suspect it is for you, to come into September without remembering the 9.11 attacks on America. I remember where I was when I first saw the twin towers, billowing smoke. When I went to Piedmont later that morning for my classes, there were crowds gathered in the space outside Student Services glued to a large TV screen. From time to time, I would hear gasps and sobs, as the tape played and replayed the crash. Several biblical scholars have advised that preachers should ignore the lectionary readings for this week and go somewhere else with the message. But I think the lectionary texts are most appropriate. They are about deliverance, forgiveness, and redemption. Nineteen years ago, everything Americans thought about living in the world and their place in it changed forever: our way of life, our sense of power, the truth about our causes. On that day, our enemies sang and danced for joy. The dangerous temptation for us as we remember the terrifying and horrific day of 9/11 is to identify only with the Israelites in the Exodus reading for today who passed unharmed through the Red Sea while the Egyptians are drowned.

There is an old Hasidic tale that the angels were rejoicing over the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea. They sang and danced and played their harps. But one angel interrupted the festivities and said: *“Look, the Creator of the Universe is sitting there weeping!”* When the Creator was asked why

he was weeping when Israel had been delivered by his own hand, the Creator replied: *“I am weeping for the dead Egyptians washed up on the shore –somebody’s sons, somebody’s husbands somebody’s fathers.”*

Forgiveness isn’t natural. Some of us are willing to get burned once *“fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me,* but we back off if we think we are putting more into a relationship than we are getting out of it. Sometimes we keep score with that little calculator in our heads until even the kindest person would write the offender off as a lost cause. And sometimes when we say we forgive, what we really do is mouth the words, but gradually back away from the person until we no longer have a relationship with them at all. Forgiveness you see is all about relationship. When we really forgive one another we stop keeping score, we stop trying to be proved right, we stop protecting ourselves from further harm. Then there is time to go for a walk with your brother or sister, talk about what you have learned, and get to know one another again.

I once read a story about a retired American pilot named Dan Cherry who found the F-4 Phantom fighter jet he had piloted during two tours of duty in Southeast Asia. The plane had been junked somewhere in the mid-west, but the sight of it took Cherry back to 1972 when he was in a dogfight with a Russian made MiG-21. Cherry won the fight. He saw the enemy pilot, both arms broken, ejecting himself from the plane. Cherry began a search for the North Vietnamese pilot. When he found him in Ho Chi Minh City, his former enemy invited him to his house for dinner, met his family, held his grandchild. Later, the Vietnamese pilot visited Cherry in the US. Dying to their old selves, two former enemies were reborn as friends who sought to be in relationship with each other.

How do you stop keeping score? Peter, Jesus’ closest disciple, believes that he has come up with a generous and completely reasonable plan for forgiveness. Isn’t seven times enough, he asks Jesus. No, Jesus says, seventy seven times. In other words, there is no limit to forgiveness. Then Jesus tells the parable of the Unforgiving Servant. There was a certain king who had a day of reckoning for his servants. He found one who owed him 10,000 talents (about 1.5 billion dollars in today’s terms) and, because he could not pay, he was about to have him thrown into jail and his wife and children sold into slavery. In response to the man’s pathetic pleadings, however, he forgave him the entire debt.

Whereupon that forgiven servant went to a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii, (about 3 thousand dollars), and demanded payment. The debtor pleaded for extra time, an extension, but the man would not hear of it and he had him thrown into jail. This story got back to the king who went into a rage. He called in the forgiven servant and said that because of his conduct, he was now to be thrown into jail. His original debt was reinstated.

On the surface, this seems to be a parable about the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. If you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart, then your Heavenly Father will haul you off to jail and throw away the key. What went wrong here? Why was the servant so unable to forgive a mere fraction of the debt that he had just been forgiven?

Because he didn't get it, in the same way that Peter didn't get it when he suggested that there was a limit to forgiveness. Perhaps the servant of the parable thought his master was soft in the head and that he had gotten away with something. Perhaps he thought he would be smarter than his master and make sure that the same thing didn't happen to him. He had missed his own forgiveness, so he couldn't extend it to anyone else. The lesson of this parable is to do unto others what has *already* been done unto you: the King has forgiven you a debt that you have no way to pay, because the King wants you to be free to be in relationship with him.

Such is the new life in Christ. Living into God's grace toward us, our deliverance from sin, we are free to make forgiveness a way of life as we mature in discipleship. Absorbing our own forgiveness into our bones makes it possible to live as Jesus instructed us and to pray for a gracious heart when forgiveness seems impossible. And remember the Lord's prayer: Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; in other words we are asking God to forgive us in proportion to how we forgive others.

Most of you probably know enough not to approach a horse directly from behind because you might get kicked. The horse can't see you because they have what is called ocular vision; they can see from the sides of their heads, but not what's directly in front of them or behind them. They can't naturally integrate their vision unless they are looking down. It takes hundreds, if not thousands, of small interactions with the animal to train it to

trust you, when you are in their blind spots. Over time, the horse observes, remembers, and applies that training to its total picture of reality.

I think it's that way with our vision as well. By remembering that the King has forgiven us a debt that we could never repay and praying that we might live as Christ taught, our vision changes and we choose not to view our enemies through one lens only. That's the way we can choose to see the ten thousand talent offenses like 9/11 and the 100- denarius offenses that come our way every day. Amen.