

September 11, 2011 Proper 19 A
St. John's Episcopal Church
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We probably all remember what we were doing that morning ten years ago when our world changed, when we first heard the news.

I was driving to a clergy day in Maine, with my mother. Two days before had been the celebration of new ministry – my installation as the new Rector of St. Mark's Waterville.

I was giving my mom a look around Maine that morning as we drove into the parking lot of St. Francis, Blue Hill – about 3 hours away.

As we drove into the parking lot at about 9:20, we saw Bishop Chilton+ standing outside of her car. All the car doors were open and the radio was blaring NPR. Clergy were gathered around her car. They looked stunned. That's where I was when I first heard the news, and no matter where you were the first reactions were the same: Shock, Horror, and then Fear – particularly after the second plane hit. Then more unbelievably - the Pentagon. And then the towers fell....

Your Rector, Karl Ruttan, was at Trinity Wall Street that morning, so you must have been frantic until you knew that he was o.k.

It seemed like forever, that day – but soon we began to hear amazing stories – stories of heroic selfless acts. Rescuers - firefighters and police rushing into the burning buildings, who were consumed as the towers fell. Flight 93 – the brave people who crashed their own plane in an open field, to prevent even more death and destruction.

In those first days, we saw the best of us, the best of this country, as people came together. We also saw some of the worst of us, as some American Muslims became the target of our anger and frustration. My best friend's husband's last name was Mohammed, and soon after 9/11 they began to receive anonymous, threatening phone calls.

And so we are here, 10 years later to the day, listening to Peter ask Jesus about forgiveness. Forgiveness – on September 11th – how do we put this all together?

Yes, it is important for us to wrestle with forgiveness this morning – especially in the context of 9/11. But this Gospel passage can only lead us into the discussion.

Peter is asking about forgiveness in the context of the Christian community – “Lord – if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?”

Jesus tells Peter that forgiveness needs to be beyond counting - that there is no limit to the forgiveness that is required. But this “forgiveness Jesus calls for” does not mean that any kind of behavior is acceptable in the church. The “forgiveness Jesus calls for” goes hand in hand with “truth telling and accountability within the church”. (Remember last week’s Gospel?)

As we know, living in community is difficult. It is difficult to practice the discipline of forgiveness in community life, even in the church. How much more difficult, then, is it for us to think about forgiveness on a global scale?

Here the parable that Jesus tells may be of help.

This parable is one of extremes. It is impossible. It was impossible for a slave to owe ten thousand talents to the King. Someone would have to work years for a single talent. Ten thousand talents is an unpayable debt. That would be like saying one of us owed ten billion dollars and we promised to work overtime to pay it back. That was the point. The debt was unpayable. And yet the King forgave it. Impossible. Yet nothing is impossible with God.....

How many times do I have to forgive him, God?

And the answer is: That’s the wrong question. There is no way for any of us to repay God. All we can do is remember that God has already forgiven us more than we could ever repay.

As the Psalmist wrote:

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

For as the heavens are high about the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

As far as the east is from the west,

So far he removes our transgressions from us.

And so, when we think about forgiveness this morning, ten years after that fateful day when our country and our world changed in an instant....

Perhaps we should look first to ourselves.

What is it that September 11th brought out in us that we need to ask forgiveness for?

Have we become less loving, less open to those who differ from us?

Have we become less generous, less willing to help others?

We can ask these questions on a national level, and on down to the individual, personal level.

For it is quite clear that God intends for us to struggle with forgiveness and all that entails, this morning, and on into the future.

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.

This does not mean that we condone the work of terrorists.

No. Far from it.

This does not mean we need to stay in abusive relationships.

No. Far from it.

(we can pray for our enemies like the rabbi in Fiddler on the Roof:

“God bless and keep themfar away from us!”)

But it does mean that forgiveness is a central spiritual discipline of our faith, and like it or not, God expects us to give it our best.