

WPC  
Rev. Ken Sunoo  
Sept. 11, 2011

Hyper Grace  
Matthew 18:21-35

September 11, 2001: the day when the world changed. It's hard to believe it's been ten years already since the 9/11 attacks. Some of you here in this sanctuary are too young to remember experiencing that day, but for the rest of us, it's a day that we'll never forget.

Where were you when you first heard of this awful tragedy, these evil, cowardly, and despicable acts of mass murder? And let me be clear, the acts were evil, but this is not a blanket condemnation of Muslims. To condemn all Muslims for what happened on 9/11 would be like condemning all Christians for the terrorist attacks perpetrated by an extremist Christian in Norway this past summer.

I'll never forget where I was at the time. I was on my way to dropping off my younger daughter Alina at her day care center. We had just finished singing some favorite songs together, and for the last 5 blocks I decided to turn on some classical music. Beautiful violin music filled the car for a few seconds, followed by the shocking announcement that the second tower of the World Trade Center had just collapsed.

Wait, that couldn't be right...I must have heard it wrong. I changed the station to NPR, and my worst fears were realized. The World Trade Center, the Pentagon, the crash in Pennsylvania. In a daze, I called my wife Deb to inform her of what was happening, then I dropped Alina off with her teachers and drove to church, where I turned on the t.v. and began watching the news.

As the devastating images were shown, I was absolutely numb with shock. What does one do when faced with such a catastrophic situation? I knew I wanted to turn to God in prayer, but I found I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to pray. In those initial moments, I was at a loss for words.

But I know what I felt: shock, horror, and grief turning into anger, rage, and a burning desire for revenge. The last thing from my mind was forgiveness. That's because forgiveness doesn't come naturally. It must be learned. As today's text shows, Jesus had to teach Peter how to forgive.

It's funny how God's spirit can operate even within such human constructions as a three-year lectionary cycle. Not only is today's Gospel text on forgiveness the lectionary reading for today, but it was also the text appointed for use on September 16, 2002, the Sunday after the one year anniversary of 9/11. Forgiveness is not being indifferent to wrong. What

happened on 9/11 were genuinely evil events – that’s what makes forgiveness so difficult. But it’s what we’re called to do.

Will Willimon was serving as the dean of the chapel at Duke University when the tragedy of 9/11 occurred. Tensions began to run high between Christians, Jews and Muslims on the campus, so Will thought it would be good to have a forum in which a rabbi, an imam, and he, as a Protestant clergyman, could talk about the way in which the respective religions would propose that people respond to the tragedy of that terrorist attack.

The Muslim imam explained that, according to prophet Muhammad, aggression against a Muslim brother should be avenged. The rabbi pointed out that if a Jew were to attack a Muslim, it would be his responsibility to seek punishment – even capital punishment – against the Jew who did that. To all of this, Will Willimon shrugged his shoulders and said, “You two make it very attractive to join either of your religions because that’s the way I would want to respond to such evil, but Jesus teaches me to do something that is very much harder. He tells me to love those who would do these evil things and to forgive those who would commit such horrible acts.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Campolo, *Stories that Feed Your Soul*, p. 42.

And how often should we forgive? A rabbinic tradition said three times. Simon Peter, in a generous gesture, suggested possibly seven times. Jesus' answer is astonishing: "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times." The Greek is difficult here: the footnote in our pew Bibles indicates that the phrase can also be translated "seventy times seven," but the exact number is not the issue. The point is that forgiveness is unlimited.

To underscore this point, Jesus tells a parable full of exaggerations. A slave somehow owes the king ten thousand talents. A single talent was worth more than fifteen year's worth of common labor, so this debt is unimaginably large. As Tom Long notes, "an Egyptian pharaoh couldn't come up with ten thousand talents, much less a slave."<sup>2</sup> When the slave begs for mercy, the king's response is preposterous and extravagant: he forgave the debt – every last penny of it – and set him free.

Now the story turns dark. This same slave, on his way out the door, the words of the king's forgiveness still ringing in his ears, runs into a second slave who, as chance would have it, owes a debt to the first slave. This debt happens to be a hundred denarii – quite a lot to a slave, but over half a million times less than the first debt. However, the first slave is ruthless. "Pay what you owe," he snarls. The second slave pleads for

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Long, *Matthew*, p. 211.

patience, using virtually the same words employed by the first slave to the king, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” But in this scene there’s no mercy. The first slave throws the second into prison.

We can imagine the reaction Jesus’ parable provoked at this point. How could this miserable slave, “fresh from being forgiven the equivalent of the national debt,”<sup>3</sup> so soon forget the mercy and forgiveness he had just received and treat another slave so harshly? There’s some satisfaction in hearing that when the king discovered the slave’s actions, he handed him over to be tortured.

Good! Or is it? Suddenly Jesus turns the parable on his disciples – and on us. “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” We’re to never forget that we ourselves have received unmerited grace and have had all our debts erased by the mercy of God. We’re not to act like the ungrateful slave.

When we’re dealing with blind rage in reaction to injustice, it’s difficult to remember that forgiveness can help heal us. Holding on to offenses and seeking revenge can be satisfying, but the problem is that carrying a grudge becomes its own offense. We become slaves to our grudges and are blinded to a better way. Thinking back now to the weeks

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<sup>3</sup> Long, p. 212.

right after the 9/11 attacks, it's hard to remember that for a while, we had the whole world's support. The French newspaper *Le Monde* proclaimed, "We are all Americans now." Imagine what the world might look like if at that time we had shown our strength as a nation in the form of more compassion and forgiveness instead of simply rushing to war. As Henry Ward Beecher once said, "Compassion will cure more sins than condemnation."

But that brings us back to the challenge of actually forgiving others, particularly those who have caused us great harm. Forgiveness is often far from our minds. And Jesus' parable implies that while he desires us to forgive others as he's forgiven us, it can't be forced. Forgiveness is learned, and it may take some time. I know there have been times when I've gotten stuck by some offense and forgotten the grace extended to me by God and by so many of the people around me.

And there are degrees of forgiveness. "Ten thousand talent offenses like September 11 don't come along that often, but 100 denarius offenses come at us every day."<sup>4</sup> The point is that to learn how to forgive on a larger scale requires that we keep practicing on a smaller scale. We may not be in a place where we're able to forgive as we've been called to by God. But we're still called to try, however hard it may be, and meanwhile, we can

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<sup>4</sup> William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Sept. 11, 2011, p. 47.

practice on the smaller stuff. Perhaps Jesus commands such extravagant forgiveness because he knows it may take some of us a really long time for it to really sink in.

This morning we've taken the time to remember the events of September 11 a decade ago when four hijacked airplanes wreaked such destruction and pain. But, as Prof. David Lose says, we also remember the events of 2000 years ago when God's own Son, hanging on a cross, "chose to call down from heaven forgiveness, not vengeance, and in this way opened a future marked not by judgment but by mercy, not by calculations but trust, not by despair but hope, not by fear but courage, not by violence but healing, not by scarcity but abundance, not by hate but love, and not by death but by new life. That's what forgiveness can do."<sup>5</sup> May God give to all of us a clear sense of the forgiveness in which - and by which - we live, and may God grant us the faith and courage to live lives of grace and forgiveness. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> David Lose, Working Preacher, "Faith, Forgiveness, and 9-11." 9-4-11