

**Sept. 17, 2017**  
**15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Matthew 18:21-35**  
**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

Today's gospel reading is challenging to hear. FORGIVENESS. It's one of the key themes of the Christian faith. On any given Sunday most of us will come here aware of our need to receive forgiveness, and some of us may also come needing to offer forgiveness to another. Whether receiving or offering it, forgiveness is one of the most difficult things to do in living as a disciple of Christ .

The parable Jesus tells comes just after Peter has asked how many times he needs to forgive. According to Jewish law, the rabbis suggested one's neighbor was entitled to three pardons. Peter must have believed that much as Jesus quibbled with the Pharisees, he would undoubtedly be more generous. So forgiving seven times was thought a more than sufficient amount of forgiveness. Interesting isn't it, that Peter wants a number. He needs to know how much will be expected of him, how much is reasonable, how much is required. It seems to be human nature to count, to calculate, to keep a ledger of our human interactions. But Jesus is not about the numbers game. Jesus doesn't want Peter to increase his forgiveness quota. He wants Peter to stop counting altogether because forgiveness, like love, is intimate and relational, not legal and transactional.

Thomas Long describes in the parable the first slave who owes the king ten thousand talents: "It's something like saying that a lowly mailroom clerk owed the CEO of IBM a bazillion dollars. It was hard to know who was more foolish – the slave, for getting into that size debt, or the king, for extending that sort of credit line to a slave." A talent was about 130 pounds of silver, the equivalent of fifteen years of a laborer's wages. Which means that the servant who owed the king 10,000 talents owed him about 150,000 years of labor. He would never ever be able to repay the king. He was indebted for many lifetimes.

The slave throws himself on the mercy of the court. Out of pity and in a sovereign act of grace, the king releases him from the entire debt. He is saved from being sold, along with his family and possessions. He walks away debt free. Unfortunately, though the king's mercy changes the slave's situation it does not change his heart. The tables are quickly turned as this former slave encounters a fellow slave who owes him a mere pittance by comparison. The fellow slave owes him a hundred denarii. A denarii was about a day's wages, so he was owed a hundred days worth of wages – about four months of work. The slave just forgiven by the king demands immediate repayment – and demands it violently with physical threat. And when the slave indebted to him can't pay up on the spot, he throws his fellow slave debtor into prison. Sadly, the formerly pardoned man is unable to pass on the mercy he received. He is still caught, trapped, and doomed to a life of relentless counting and emotional scarcity. He is still a slave to the world of calculating and reckoning everything according to the law and will therefore

remain a slave to that life – stuck in the ways of the past when he had just been freed to enter a new and open future.

The challenge to extend unlimited forgiveness was not only for Matthew's faith community, but given to the whole church and every person of faith, for we, too have received grace beyond measure. We too, at times have been caught thinking in terms of measurable mercy, not unlimited grace. We pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts/ sins or trespasses, as we forgive our debtors/those who sin or trespass against us", yet we have great difficulty with forgiveness. It's far too easy to let those words slide off our tongues automatically, giving little thought to how much we need God's help to live them out.

If we're honest, we know our responses when we have been "sinned against" run the gamut. We hold grudges. We demand vengeance, personal or legal. We "put the one who has hurt us on probation", impatiently waiting for evidence that the person who has offended us deserves our forgiveness. Sometimes we practice more sophisticated varieties of punishment like withdrawing from the relationship, engaging in passive aggressive behavior, or venting our anger in manipulation, deceit, or gossip. On the other hand, sometimes we hurry to "kiss and make up"; that is we race with lightning speed from our hurts to try and force reconciliation without truly acknowledging the negative impact of the offense and looking at what must be forgiven before lasting healing can take hold.

Spiritual teacher and Roman Catholic priest Henri Nouwen writes: "Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly. We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family."

So what does forgiveness look like? Spiritual director and author Marjorie Thompson offers this working description of forgiveness: "To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment might seem. It is in this sense that we speak of "forgetting"; not that the actual wound is ever completely forgotten, but that its power to hold us trapped in continual replay of the event, with all the resentment each remembrance makes fresh, is broken."

Monday of this past week marked the 16<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in New York City, the Pentagon, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Dr. Courtney Cowart shared her personal account of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in a sermon she preached ten years later on Sunday, Sept. 11, 2011. The gospel of the day was today's reading from Matthew. On that day in 2001, she was in Trinity Church's 2<sup>nd</sup> floor office tower surrounded by a group of 25 spiritual leaders from around the world when the first tower was hit. The group narrowly escaped down the stairs and out through the church's day care center, evacuating children as they went, minutes

before the second tower collapsed. Following a very graphic description of her experience that day, Dr. Cowart says in her sermon: **[and I quote directly]** -

*“If September 11<sup>th</sup> was the day we came face to face with the horror of a morality of vengeance, so was it also the day that those of us who were there and later served in the recovery began to learn how real the astounding beauty of unlimited mercy and love really is.*

*For many of us the witness to its power is embodied in the first responders and the recovery workers who served tirelessly on their hands and knees for nearly a year inside the pile to reclaim the remains of every life lost.*

*Days after the attacks thousands of strangers, recovery workers and volunteers came together in a little church called St. Paul’s Chapel and formed an alliance that practiced the extraordinarily demanding spirituality of forgiveness 24/7 for 9 months. In the chapel these practices poured out of us with an intensity and passion that actually surpassed the intensity of hate, even as enormous as hate’s smoldering presence and sickening stench still was. As real and vivid as the horror of vengeance, so became for us the truth Jesus teaches in our lesson today. Unlimited acts of mercy free us all.*

*Safety, dignity, our precious web of relationship – all those human necessities violence and trauma destroy – regenerated in this chapel, in this fellowship, so rapidly and to such an extraordinary degree that being in the sanctuary was likened to touching the face of God. The thickness of the loving energy was a force field that hit you physically when you entered. By the grace of God, these blessings we desperately needed multiplied through the practice of one thing: thousands upon thousands of acts of mercy. The chapel’s atmosphere worked on us, formed us, healed us and, eventually, as its reputation spread throughout the world, drew many of the great survivors of trauma, whose devastating experience made them peacemakers for life.*

*Most moving for me was a day in the springtime of the recovery when a delegation of survivors from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the original Ground Zero, came to St. Paul’s as guests of Colleen Kelley and the Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> Families for Peaceful Tomorrows. There they stood in an American church, having traveled across the world to say to us how sorry they were for our losses. In their message of condolence, they offered to us the healing balm that absolves and forgives, renewing their own humanity and making us all one once more.*

*In my mind’s eye, later I can see Michael Lapsley, another wounded healer, celebrating the noon Eucharist at the altar. Lifting the chalice to God with two prosthetic hooks for hands and praying: “Drink you all of this. This is my Blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you shall drink it in remembrance of me.” **[end sermon quote]***

The September 11<sup>th</sup> events wreaked evil, destruction, and havoc in our nation in an act of violent retribution. Lives were changed forever. Yet as people of faith, we also remember earlier events - the events of two thousand years ago when God's own Son, surveying a field of broken lives and desolate hearts, 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!

May God give to all of us a real and renewed sense of the forgiveness in which – and by which – we live. May God grant us the faith and courage to walk forward into the future such forgiveness creates. This is the forgiveness and the future that embodies the Kingdom of God - a kingdom of grace upon grace upon grace, from whose richness we daily receive. AMEN.

*Note: The sermon of Dr. Courtney Cowart quoted herein is found in its entirety on the website [Day One](#), September 11, 2011.*