

## **Proper 19 – Lectionary 24 – September 11, 2011**

Where were you ten years ago today? Do you remember what you were doing? I vividly remember the events of September 11, 2001. I recall turning on the television and seeing the planes crash into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. At first, I thought it was some sort of movie or commercial, but as I continued to watch the news reports it became clear that this was drama in real life in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington D.C. You recall that the news continued for days as the names of those who were killed were slowly identified and we witnessed the rescue and relief workers sort through the rubble and respond to people whose lives had been turned upside down.

I was living in Portland at the time and I suspect what was true there took place in other cities across the country. It was as though a dark pall had covered the city. We really had the sense that life stopped. Our ordinary routines were put on hold. I think it was on the day or two after September 11, that we held a special service of worship at the church. Congregations all over the city were doing the same sort of thing. Then, on the Sunday following 9/11 we had record attendance. People were flocking to places of worship in droves. I don't know all the reasons for this, but what I felt at the time was that in the midst of great loss, people were vulnerable and even eager to hear a word from God and to experience something of God's healing presence.

We all have times of mourning and grief and loss. It is part of the human adventure. It happens in our personal lives, within our families and in our closest relationships and communities, but this was the first time I ever experienced anything that came close to a collective sense of grief of such magnitude that it seemed as if the entire nation was in grief. I remember at the special service praying psalms of lament. These are the psalms that cry out to God and complain to God in the midst of broken and deathly circumstances. We also prayed psalms of resilient hope. Before we got to the hope, though, we had to be real about the despair. That trajectory from loss to hope permeates the psalms. In fact, some of the psalms themselves contain both lament and prayers of trust. Small wonder since hope speaks loudest in the midst of despair and we may pray so when we are in that vulnerable place. And I believe, at least for a period of days, we were all in that vulnerable place.

I also remember asking myself at the time, what is the distinctive word from God that I am called to proclaim? What does God want to say to us? Now, ten years later, on the tenth year commemoration of September 11, I ask myself this same question. What will be God's word for us? So, we turn to the lectionary readings for today and there it is: a distinctive Gospel word. Did you notice the common thread running through today's readings?

All the readings dwell on *forgiveness*. In the Old Testament reading Joseph is reconciled with his brothers. As we prayed today's Psalm we were reminded of God's essential character – merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, which does not deal with us according to our sins but removes them from us. The second lesson from Romans asks the pertinent question: "Who are we to pass judgment?" And then in the Gospel reading, Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive a sister or brother who sins against him. Seven times? No, seventy-seven ... which is Jesus' way of saying: "Stop keeping score. Forgive always." Then, in a rather poignant parable Jesus speaks of the inability those who have been forgiven everything to practice forgiveness in kind.

You see, Jesus expects the church to practice mutual forgiveness and Jesus himself shapes such a way of being in community. Forgiveness is a salient mark of the church because relationships with one another are sacred. Not only does forgiveness bind up wounds, it shapes the way we live and provides a way forward. The church may then be for the world a sign of God's reconciling love.

We have a clue as to what forgiveness looks like in our first lesson. Joseph and his brothers are reconciled. Now, his brothers are not exactly sure that this would be the case. They were afraid that he might exact some sort of revenge upon them. After all, you could say they had it coming. You might remember that Joseph was Jacob's favorite. From the get go his brothers were jealous. They even plotted to kill him. They sold him into slavery. Well, to make a very long story short we come to this climactic scene and what do we find? No revenge. No retribution. Instead a family reunion filled with tears. Joseph weeps. His brothers weep. He reminds them that it is not his place to take revenge. He is not God after all and in the midst of this sorry situation, God is able to do some good.

The story helps us see that forgiveness comes from God. No, forgiveness isn't automatic. It takes time. It requires soul searching and honest inventory. And is often the case, as was the case for Joseph and his siblings, it is preceded by a good deal of tears. It is a process and for some folks it may take even years but in the process itself we may discover healing and new life.

The other day we were entertaining guests and we were playing a little game called *Table Topics*. Basically, it is a series of questions to get conversation going and this was one of the questions: Is justice or forgiveness more important? Clearly Joseph's brothers expected a form of justice. What they got was forgiveness. But, I'm not sure that it is an either/or proposition. I wonder if what Joseph and his brothers experienced was justice *by way* of forgiveness. That's the biblical model of justice ...

Justice, in the realm of God, is not about revenge or retribution but calls us to rise above hatred and fear to something more life-giving. It does not mean that we minimize whatever horrible deed was done. In fact, a lot of times, in order to achieve reconciliation, sin must be dealt with honestly and forthrightly. The pain inflicted honestly admitted and repentance humbly done. The enormity of injustice isn't glossed over or ignored and in our relationships, when ruptured, we need honest conversation and assessment of hurts inflicted and pain received, but the goal is the restoration of relationships, not the eliminations of them.

In the realm of God, justice is always restorative. Relationships are restored, communities are made new and whole by the gift of forgiveness and in the great vision for humanity that is articulated in Scripture, we a vision, a picture where all nations will be restored.

In the wake of 9/11 did we go the route of restorative justice or were we too quick to exact retribution and revenge?

Hearken back to the Baptismal Covenant because it is really a reminder for us of what it means to live as disciples of Christ. The Covenant describes for us a way of life together and one of the things we promises to do with God's help is to strive for justice and peace in all the earth. That same baptismal promise is worded a little differently in the *Book of Common Prayer* where it the call to work for justice is followed up by this: "to respect the dignity of every human being" ...

every person, regardless of age or color or religious preference. When we commit ourselves to that way of living we may indeed be a sign of reconciliation and to the world.

The other day I was heartened to learn a true post-9/11 story. A story not of retribution or fear, but a story of hope. It's about two women who were bound together by common pain. Patti Quiegley and Susan Retik both lost their husbands when the Twin Towers collapsed in New York City on September 11. These women were pregnant with babies their fathers would never see. These two American women started an organization called "Beyond the 11<sup>th</sup>." The organization is dedicated to helping widows in Afghanistan ... women just like themselves. They reached out beyond the borders to women in a country that has been named the enemy to do something remarkable and life-giving. Last year alone they helped more than 1,000 Afghan widows start businesses to support their families. This important work cost less money that keeping one American soldier in Afghanistan. Beyond collapsing the borders, these remarkable women refused to be hemmed in by fear or by those perceived to be different or those who were named the enemy and in walking alongside these women shared in a common humanity and in a journey marked by hope.

As we commemorate 9/11, let us cling not to our words but God's word - a distinctive word for all seasons of joy and despair and so today we pray not for our nation alone but for healing and peace among all nations and all peoples and for the grace and wisdom to live out God's brand of justice ... by way of forgiveness. The other day I was encouraged to sign a petition from the good people of *Sojourners* magazine that read like this: *As a Christian and as an American on the tenth Anniversary of 9/11 attacks I commit myself to work for building peace in my community and the world and to love my neighbors by standing against hatred and fear.* I took that to be an echo of the baptismal covenant. Today let us dwell in that distinctive word of God. Pray for those whose lives were lost and those who yet grieve. Pray for healing and peace among all peoples and nations. Pray that we might live out the calling of the church - to be a sign of reconciling love to the world ... it is the way of justice that is accomplished by the way of forgiveness. Amen.