

Proper 19A – September 14, 2014
Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

In this past week of our yearly anniversary of 9-11, we remember death and loss, and we still experience anger about the injustice of that horrible day and its aftermath. ⁱ Coincidentally, our readings assigned for today are about encountering a God of forgiveness. Okay – but how do we *journey* from all those feelings evoked by 9-11 to a place of forgiveness? As C.S. Lewis put it some seven years after the end of the Second World War, “If we really want to learn how to forgive, perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo.”ⁱⁱ We can say much the same today about violent fundamentalist extremists still very much at large thirteen years after 9-11. So, let’s begin by looking for a moment at today’s gospel parable about forgiveness told by Jesus as part of his teaching on the importance of restoring right relationships within the community of faith. Having listened to Jesus describe a process to address wrongs done in the community, his disciple Peter wants to know what exactly is required of him. Peter is looking for a specific guideline—a policy as it were, which he hopes will define the limits as to how far he must go with all this relationship and restoration business. Peter asks, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” “Not seven times,” Jesus replies, “but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus is saying that there is no limit to forgiveness; that forgiving those who sin against us is not something we ever get done with, but is something that goes on forever. The difference between Peter’s proposal and Jesus’ response is not just a matter of math, but of the nature of forgiveness. Whoever counts has not forgiven, but is keeping score and biding his or her time. The kind of forgiveness Jesus calls for and lives out all the way to his cross is beyond all calculation.^{iv}

Jesus addresses Peter’s concern with a parable about a king who wants to settle his accounts with his servants, many of whom owe him money. This is a king who keeps thorough books and knows just who owes him what amounts. He starts with someone who owes him a massive amount; we’re told 10,000 talents, an amount equivalent to about \$1.5 Billion in today’s economy! And yet, this story Jesus tells wipes out the heavenly as well as earthly bookkeeping department. For this king, in fact, is not a bookkeeper in his heart of hearts. A fundamental desire to restore relationships moves him to shelve his ledger book, even though the amounts in it are astounding. In doing so, he turns bondage into freedom, debt into credit and death into life. All he asks is that those like this servant who have received forgiveness of debt and great mercy become themselves ministers of such forgiveness and mercy, and stop behaving like people who are owed something.

However, when the king releases the servant and forgives him his debt, the servant just doesn’t get it. Barbara Brown Taylor states that, in fact, he thinks he has gotten away with something. He thinks he has pulled a fast one on the king.^v The servant who is forgiven his debts, misses the whole meaning of being forgiven! The king who forgave him wanted a right relationship, and the debt and the servitude were getting in the way of that.^{vi} But to the man who was forgiven – he just thinks he is getting off the hook and doesn’t seem

to care about the relationship. Having supposedly “outsmarted” the king, the forgiven servant figures that he needs to minimize his own losses in order to prevent the same thing happening to him. And so he grabs the first person who owed him and demands to be paid. When that debtor asks for some time to repay, the forgiven servant has him thrown in jail. He missed the meaning of his own forgiveness and thus was unable to forgive anyone else.

The ending here is not pretty—as is the style in Matthew’s gospel—and it can lead to further misunderstanding.^{vii} Peter and the rest of us hearing this might think that the moral of this parable is “do unto others or the king will do unto *you*.” But that is not the moral of this story! Rather, the message is “do unto others as the king has *already* done unto you.” It’s a matter of understanding that we have already been forgiven by someone to whom we owe everything, including every breath we take and every beat of our hearts; forgiven by someone who has given and given to us, someone who has examined our enormous debt in detail and knows our credit rating, as it were, and what little chances there are of repayment. Why? Because that someone wants to be in relationship with us. When that someone has stopped keeping score on us, we feel foolish keeping score on others. That’s what real forgiveness is about. Forgiveness isn’t forgiveness if what we are really doing is keeping score. And keeping score is a despairing business. And, as Frederick Buechner put it, “Despair has been called the unforgivable sin—not presumably because God refuses to forgive it but because it despairs of the possibility of being forgiven”^{viii} — or of forgiving others.

Forgiveness is complicated, though, especially in situations where we need to separate ourselves from behavior from which we or others need to be protected from the deep and horrific wrongdoing—children or spouses abused, or other acts of violence on a small or large scale; the tragedy of 9-11, the actions of Boko Haram or ISIS—you name it. Some relationships need to be broken, confronted, ended, before we can be healed, before forgiveness can occur. But even when justice needs to be done, it still calls us toward the mercy of forgiveness. Frederick Buechner put it this way,

“Justice must be invoked not only for goodness sake but for the good of your own soul. Justice may consist of paying the price for what you’ve done or simply of the painful knowledge that you deserve to pay a price, which is payment enough. Without one form of justice or the other the result is ultimately disorder and grief for you and everybody. Thus justice is itself not unmerciful. Justice also does not preclude mercy. It makes mercy possible. Justice is the pitch of the roof and the structure of the walls. Mercy is the patter of rain on the roof and the life sheltered by the walls. Justice is the grammar of things. Mercy is the poetry of things.”^{ix}

In other words, the one who judges us most finally is the One who loves us most fully.^x And so, the justice and mercy of God are ultimately one and the same. Thus, if there is a line, it is a fine line between justice and mercy; although we humans struggle endlessly with how, when and whether to extend each, as if they are mutually exclusive. Fortunately, we worship a God who loves justice and mercy equally, and who lavishes both upon us as we ask and need. Again, this is *not* a call to passivity,

complacency or capitulation to evil acts and hateful ideologies such as what we saw unleashed more than thirteen years ago. Instead, it is a call to stretch and grow and to engage in this hard work of reaching out and across to others in the messy mix of it all. As any of you who have tried to love your enemies know, that's about as hard a work as anyone can do.^{xi}

Although we may not call it forgiveness yet, much has been going on in peoples' lives over the past thirteen years that lays the groundwork for forgiveness.^{xii} For some, the loss of a loved one has them living continually through an agony, an abiding absence. Yet, seeds of hope and forgiveness, sparks found in the ashes, have begun to emerge. For many who lost loved ones and for many others, the horror was so complete that it may well move them to forgiveness. But how?

As I stated last week, for many of us such healing and forgiveness begins with the realization that in 9-11, we shared in one catastrophic moment some of the very everyday experiences and insecurities of those living in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Gaza and Israel and so many other places. As we have experienced or witnessed this horror not only as individuals and families, but also as a nation, we realize that other individuals and whole communities in so many places are mistreated and made victims of horrendous violence. And that awareness has moved many toward awareness and compassion.

As well, in the case of 9-11, a powerful curiosity in "the other" has been stirred, a seeking to know what informs and motivates those of different faith traditions, socio-political and cultural backgrounds; and of how they look at reality and define themselves in relation to us. This curiosity, this way of trying to make sense out of a senseless world by making it relational, is a hopeful way forward in seeking to build bonds of our common humanity. We clearly still have a long way to go. Yet it will only be when we reach some common ground that we ourselves will ever really be on holy ground. U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan spoke a few years ago at a conference sponsored by Trinity Church, Wall Street at which the speakers were asked to "name evil," something that politicians and evangelists seem so able to do these days. Annan said, "If we are intent on naming evil...let us name it intolerance. Let us name it as exclusion. Let us name it as a false assumption that we have nothing to learn from beliefs and traditions different from our own."^{xiii}

God who is nearer even than our breath and closer than our hands and feet, is calling on us to cling to God even as we sigh - or scream - at the silence or absence of God that we often feel in these troubled times. And there are these seeds of hope and forgiveness sown by God in each of our hearts - compassion, curiosity, connection, and vulnerability - discovered in the midst of our worst fears being realized, and cracked open in the fires of tragedy, and now growing.^{xiv} And so, our remembrance of death and loss, anger and the injustice of 9-11, is balanced by the active remembrance of God's way with us and all God's children. The God who is revealed in our Scriptures as a God of mercy has forgiven us our debts, leaving us with the only remaining debt we owe God, which is to fulfill the law of love, to love our neighbor as ourselves, to "forgive your brother or sister from your

heart,” as Jesus calls for in our gospel.^{xv} At this time of remembrance and hope, as Enuma Okoro put it, “we might find ourselves asking—in light of our pain, grief, righteous anger, or sense of injustice—‘who is my neighbor, my sister, or my brother?’ [Yet] if we look to the God who became human, [who] sacrificed his life for the love of those who considered him an enemy, then we might not struggle so much with the question but with the answer.”^{xvi} And that *begins* to spell FORGIVENESS.

ⁱ Just as the clouds of dust and smoke and falling debris blotted out the sun on that otherwise beautiful Tuesday morning on September 11, 2001; over these past thirteen years war and violence without end seemed to have blotted out God’s light as well. Often we have not felt God’s presence and mercy, but rather, God’s apparent absence and wrath, as it were. It was not just the annihilating cloud of dust and smoke and falling debris that marked God’s absence thirteen years ago; nor just the storm and chaos that then rippled through the world, in the ensuing wars—it seems God was absent even from many of our thoughts about God, e.g., as being contained or defined in one religious tradition over against others, or defined as the giver of the right answers that can explain senseless tragedy. My former Bishop in Scotland, Richard Holloway, put it this way,

“‘Poor little talkative Christianity’ said E M Forster and, my God, he was right. And it is not just the boring talk, though there’s been an ocean of that, it is the cruel talk, the judgment talk, the superior talk, the dismissive talk, the ‘I have the truth and you don’t’ talk that is so crucifying. Crucifying, yes. I know it’s a bit late to have made the discovery, but isn’t it time we dismantled all the Calvaries our words have built for Christ and simply tried to follow him, preferably in silence?” (Richard Holloway, “The Myth of the Incarnation” (Gresham Lectures, Part IV); See also Richard Holloway, Doubts and Loves (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2001), p. 179)

Well, God is not a set of answers; nor does God give clear explanations. What God does give is God’s self, God’s very being, even in the midst of the dust and smoke and falling debris. It is out of the seeming absence of God that God becomes present.

ⁱⁱ C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity ((1952) New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1980), Book 3, Chapter 7.

ⁱⁱⁱ or as some translations have it, “seventy times seven”.

^{iv} Forgiving someone even once can be strenuous enough. Barbara Brown Taylor has us think about this using a mild illustration of setting a lunch date with a friend that you go to a lot of trouble to keep and who stands you up time and again. See Barbara Brown Taylor, The Seeds of Heaven (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1990), pp. 66.

Forgiving someone once is one thing, but are you really going to set another lunch date after the second or third time this happens? Are you really willing to go through this routine seventy-five or 488 more times, depending on how we translate Jesus’ pronouncement? Not likely. Human nature does not work that way. As Taylor puts it,

“Most of us are willing to get burned once, a lot of us even twice; but the third time we tend to back off. It’s as if we have little calculators in our heads, keeping track of how much we are putting into our relationships versus how much we are getting out of them, and not many of us pursue those with a negative balance. When someone lets us down again and again, we tend to turn our attention elsewhere. We prefer cost-efficient relationships in which there is a better rate of exchange, in which what we give and what we get are more nearly even. That may be a crass way to put it, but you know it’s true. No one wants a one-way relationship, in which one person does all the giving and forgiving while the other one just gets and gets and gets” (See Taylor, The Seeds of Heaven, *Ibid.*, p. 67).

It's that part of our human nature that Jesus is speaking to in today's gospel, that part of us that—like Peter—wants to place limits with people who run up debts with us, as it were. After all we try to be patient, but surely there's a limit—having forgiven someone who wrongs us seven times, and having been taken advantage of every time—seven times is surely enough, isn't it?

^v Taylor, *Ibid.*, p. 70. He thought the king had become a bit soft in the head; after all, he had accepted the obvious lie of the servant who pleaded, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." The servant could never repay the debt he owed, and he knew it, and the king knew it; but if making the king feel sorry for him meant he did not have to pay, what did he care?

^{vi} Taylor adds that "it never crossed his mind that what was *really* happening to him was that he was being forgiven from the heart by someone who understood the enormity of his debt—indeed by someone who had financed it—but who was willing to let it all go, to stop keeping score, to erase the debt that had become a substitute for the relationship." Taylor, *Ibid.*, p. 70.

^{vii} Yes, the unforgiving servant is called into account and is himself thrown into prison—life is consequential. But of course, he had, in fact, already created his own mental prison, by refusing to be forgiven and by refusing to forgive.

^{viii} Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (London: Collins, 1973), p. 19.

^{ix} Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 68. And Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, (London: Collins, 1973), p. 48

^x Buechner adds, "The worst sentence that God's Love can pass is that we behold the suffering which that Love has endured for our sake; and that is also our acquittal" (Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, *Ibid.*, p. 48).

^{xi} As St. Augustine put it, "Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside of yourself" (Quoted in William Sloane Coffin, *A Passion For the Possible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 22). Or as William Sloane Coffin stated, "for the sake of God's children who are going to be needlessly slaughtered, a prophetic minority must always be ready to speak out clearly and pay up personally. At the same time, we must pray for grace to contend against wrong without being wrongly contentious, grace to fight pretensions of national righteousness without personal self-righteousness... True, [if we love the good,] we have to hate evil; else we're sentimental. But if we hate evil more than we love the good, we just become damn good haters, and of those the world already has too many." (William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 69, 20). And so, our job as workers in the mixed fields God has placed us in, or called us to, is not to give ourselves over to the enemy by consuming ourselves with the destruction of the weeds, but rather to mind our business as it were—our business being the repair of the world as instruments of God's love, justice and healing—*seeding more than weeding*. Toiling in such mixed ground, we may then begin to find some new common ground, and in that, even holy ground.

^{xii} It's going to take a lot longer even than these years we've had to incorporate and fully integrate the horror of September 11th and its aftermath into our collective experience.

^{xiii} Kofi Annan, speech delivered to the National Conference of the Trinity Institute (New York: Trinity Church, May 2, 2004).

Finally, nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people – broken open physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main concern then is not how we can hide or get "beyond" our woundedness so as to "get on with life." Rather, what we are learning is how we can put our woundedness and vulnerability in the service of others through heart-to-heart connections. The tragic events of 9/11 have wounded us all and have thrown us back on the infinite resources of God, having us recognize our dependence on God, and our interdependence with one another and the wider human race. When our

woundedness and vulnerability cease to be a source of shame or embarrassment or anger, and become a source of healing and forgiveness, enabling us to share one another's burdens, we then become "wounded healers" and seeds of hope for others.

A stanza in the Leonard Cohen song, *Anthem*, reads, "Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." - and that's how the light gets out, when our hearts have been cracked open. So this is a time of remembrance and hope; and God's gift of hope is present even when our worst fears have been realized - when our hearts are broken open. Our worst fears were realized that morning ten years ago - and in so many places around the world since then - and yet God is hoping in us, and that hope will not disappoint. It's that hope that Jim Wallis speaks of when he says, "The principal vocation of religious communities in the public square is not to bring their dogma, but to bring the one thing you must have if you're going to change your neighborhood, your city, your nation, or your world. That's the dynamic and power and promise of hope" (Jim Wallis et al., "Fundamentalism and the Modern World" in *Sojourners* magazine (Washington: D.C., March-April 2002)).

^{xiv} or as Elie Wiesel stated, "We must look for hope - as a Great Hasidic master said, 'If you look for the spark, you will find it in the ashes'" (The New England Holocaust Memorial website. Friends of the New England Holocaust Memorial. 4 Dec. 2001. <<http://www.henm.com/contents/dedication.html>>. (Quote by Elie Wiesel, dedication statement, 22 Oct. 1995)).

^{xv} Matthew 18:35

^{xvi} Enuma Okoro, "Remembering" in *Sojourners* (Washington, D.C., September-October 2011), p. 56.