

A Sermon Preached in the Church of Saint James the Less, Ashland, Virginia, on the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 11<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

Text: Matthew 18.21-35

Along with all of our country during the last couple of weeks I was pondering and remembering the events of 9/11, now – hard to believe – a decade ago. Those events were a defining moment for our country and indeed for the world. It has adjusted and changed our history and the world's history in innumerable and incalculable ways. Now, I wonder if you connected that day and those events and this remembrance with today's gospel that we just read. I certainly did, and was hit directly in the face. This gospel is a challenge for me. So, this morning, I want to draw you into my own struggle. I propose to look at it under three headings: what; why; and how.

First, what? The “what” of today's gospel is forgiveness. Frankly, this gospel makes me shudder. I could ease some of my burden if I were – and most of you know I'm not – a Biblical literalist. It says “another member of the church,” so I could feel that I am responsible to you in St James the Less and the rest of the world doesn't count. That would limit my responsibility to wrestle with this passage.

The Greek word is “adelphos,” like Philadelphia, “the city of brotherly love.” The truth is that we are all sisters and brothers in the whole of the human family. The Greek verb “to forgive” is “aphiemi.” It means to dismiss, to send away peremptorily, with no strings, no footnotes, no justifications, like the mistress of a Victorian household dismissing a bad house servant. “Be gone!” Period. The end.

This verb aphiemi is, interestingly enough, found in the New Testament, with only a very few exceptions, in the gospels, those special books of Jesus closely connected to him. And in those passages it is used in two specially important places. The first is in Jesus's cry as he is dying nailed to his cross: “Father forgive [aphiemi] them for they know not what they do.” The second is in the prayer that runs easily and often thoughtlessly across our tongue, “Forgive [aphiemi] us our sins [sometimes translated “debts”] as we forgive those who sin against us. That little word “as” means “to the degree that” – forgive us what we have done amiss only to the degree that we are willing to forgive people who have offended us.

This word and its imperative takes us to the very heart of the Gospel, to the very heart of Jesus, to the heart of my struggle which I believe I share with you. It's very hard for me to preach to you on this, but the stole around my neck, the sign of my ordained vocation, is a yoke of obedience, which means that I cannot escape my dilemma with easy answers. This gospel, and this word, connects us to the events of 9/11, but even more deeply to the heart of our relationship with other people and with God.

The opposite of forgiveness is punishment. The slave and his debt vis a vis the master represents forgiveness. It wasn't a matter of extending the payment period or of lowering the interest rate. It was done away with, no strings attached, no footnotes, no exceptions, no reservations. Aphiemi.

The slave vis a vis his fellow slave was the opposite: punishment. It's so like me; so, perhaps, like us. Forgive me, punish them. That's me all the way. You know how little children do in a fight. "She started it." "He hit me first." Somebody else's fault. They deserve what they get in the way of retribution. That's our nature. It's NATURE. Try, for example, impinging on the food dish of a hungry Rottweiler and see what you get. We tend to want ourselves forgiven and everyone else zapped. Even deeper, we can't forgive – not only other people – we often can't forgive ourselves. It's called guilt. We might get as far as "I'll forgive but I'm not forgetting." That's not it. That's why it's so hard. No strings attached, no conditions, no footnotes. Aphiami. That's the "what:" – forgiveness.

Second, why? The Gospel is always for us and for our welfare. In the end forgiveness is about us, not about them. It's natural to hit back, to retaliate, to destroy as we feel destroyed. It's very natural; but the work of God's grace is SUPER-natural, that is, "above" nature. In school the math teacher used to say to me "Learn from your mistakes." It was the last thing I wanted to hear; I just wanted to be done with math in any form. Still, in all honesty, to learn from the past is to safeguard against the same mistakes again. That's a very different thing from retaliation.

To stay frozen in the past with its errors and sadnesses is to be inhibited from moving into the future, and the future is always where God is, God ahead of us, to lead us forward in the end, forgiveness is not just about how we feel, not just about people who have offended or hurt us. In the end forgiveness and moving on are about ourselves, about the quality of our life; about the quality and health of our own soul.

I found this movingly stated recently in a murder mystery by Val McDermid, a marvelous Scottish writer I have recently discovered. Speaking of Inspector Carol Jordan in [The Last Temptation](#), she says "She knew she had two choices. She could let this rage fester inside her like a wound that could poison her whole system. Or she could finally draw a line under the past and use that energy to drive her forward into the future. She knew what she wanted to do. The only question was whether she could manage it." Forgiveness is, in the end, about us, about our welfare and health.

Third, how? There are a couple of things I have discovered. Forgiveness is not an action, an event. Forgiveness is a process. For me it is closely connected to my prayers. I try to dialogue with myself. I try to begin not with who has offended or hurt me, but with who might have been offended by me. Only then come the people by whom I have felt hurt or offended. I pray with their faces in my mind, asking God to take away my own reproach and my own hardness of heart, holding their face in my mind in front of the face of God. Over and over in my prayers, until God's mercy begins to erode my limestone determination to be right, and my stony unforgiving heart. Over and over, like the prayers of the rosary. This is a little way I have found to attempt to practice what is at the very heart of Jesus; what is meant by grace to be at the heart of love.

I hope you'll have a look th the web site of Coventry Cathedral. On the night of 14<sup>th</sup> November 1940 German fire bombs were rained on the English midland industrial city. In that holocaust the wooden roof of the mediaeval Cathedral of St Michael and All Angels was ignited and the cathedral burned. After the ruins had cooled, the dean found two charred timbers that had been

part of the roof structure. They had fallen in the shape of a cross. He wired them together and stood them against the charred stonework of the wall that had been behind the high altar. Later a priest from one of the parishes in the city, with a piece of chalk, wrote on the fire-blackened wall "Father Forgive." Three large mediaeval nails were retrieved from the ruins and made into a cross, and from that action arose what is known as the Community of the Cross of Nails, an international organization dedicated to reconciliation among peoples. Three similar crosses were presented to the German cathedrals of Kiel, Dresden and Berlin, which had been destroyed in Allied bombing.

A new cathedral was built, not on the site but beside the ruins of the mediaeval building, and today one passes through the ruins to enter the new space. It was rebuilt, in the words of its dean, "not as a sign of defiance but a sign of faith, trust and hope for the future of the world." The old ruins; the entrance to the new cathedral. The old life an entrance to the new. The scars of the past signs of empowerment for the future. This is the heart of the Gospel. This is the heart of Jesus. This is the way of the life in grace.

We end with the little Litany of Coventry, prayed each day in the cathedral:

**God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespass against them.**

The hatred which divides nation from nation, race from race, class from class,

FATHER FORGIVE

The covetous desire of people and nations to possess what is not their own

FATHER FORGIVE

The greed which exploits the work of human hands and lays waste the earth

FATHER FORGIVE

Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others

FATHER FORGIVE

Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned, the homeless, the refugee,

FATHER FORGIVE

The lust which dishonors the bodies of men, women and children

FATHER FORGIVE

The pride which leads us to trust in ourselves and not in God

FATHER FORGIVE

**Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.**

I offer these things to you with faith and hope and love, and in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Charles Austin Joy