

The Face of Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35

September 11, 2011

I.

Today we look back upon a great tragedy. The logo on our service bulletins calls us to remember the victims and first responders in New York and Washington, D.C. ten years ago. We also honor the crew and passengers on United Airlines Flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania. And our Eucharist today will be observed with special intention for all of them and their families.

We all probably remember where we were that fateful morning. I still was practicing law in Washington, D.C, and we were in a conference room watching coverage from New York. Then we heard that a third plane had crashed into the Pentagon and a fourth hijacked plane was thought to be flying toward Washington. Our offices were a block from the White House.

Needless to say we grabbed our back-up computer disks, sent quick e-mail messages to our other offices, and evacuated the building. For some reason that escapes me now I had taken the Metro to work that day. My car was parked in a commuter lot in Virginia.

So those of us who did not have cars downtown decided to take the Metro north into Maryland. Lines running south toward the Pentagon had been closed. People were calm and orderly. There was no panic or chaos as we left the building, made our way to the Metro station, and rode the train through the darkness of the tunnel.

But emotions were evident. Everyone knew there must have been fatalities in the buildings and on the planes. Everyone knew that an enemy had done this. And even before the first tower collapsed, a grim sense of the certainty of justice for the unknown perpetrators was emerging. No one was thinking about forgiving anyone.

The date of September 11 is forever etched in our memories, probably much like December 7 was remembered in the years following 1941. But there is a big difference between the aftermath of what happened on those two days.

By December 7, 1951, ten years after the Pearl Harbor attack, there had been reconciliation. We were working with the Japanese people to rebuild their nation and plan for a future in the world together. By then we were friends, not enemies.

The same cannot be said, however, for the political systems and cultures that have spawned the evil of terrorism that threatens us yet today. It is worse, not better. And our struggle against terrorism sometimes spills over into our conversations with peaceful nations in the Mid-East.

II.

Which brings us to today's Gospel. Peter asked Jesus how often we should forgive someone, and then he speculated, "As many as seven times?" Jesus responded with a different number. Some versions of the Bible quote Jesus as saying seventy seven times, while other versions translate it as seventy times seven.

Either way, Jesus was speaking symbolically to make the point that there is no limit to the forgiveness we are called to offer. And then he used the parable of the ungrateful servant to underscore the dire consequences of failure to forgive.

But it is important to read this story, as well as other similar biblical passages, in context. In today's reading Peter asked about forgiving "another member of the church." And after telling

the story of how the unforgiving servant was cast into debtor's prison, Jesus said that the same would happen "to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

The key words are "brother or sister," which in the Bible mean fellow Christians (Mt. 12:50, Mk. 3:35) This also is clear from Luke's Gospel, where Jesus said, "If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive (17:3)." This was taught as a standard of behavior toward other disciples.

Jesus again confirmed this idea as he said, "When offering your gift at the altar, if your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift (Mt 5:23-24).

So, these passages clearly establish that we indeed are called to extend true forgiveness to fellow believers, to our brothers and sisters in Christ, when they seek reconciliation.

And that makes sense. If someone in the church does something that hurts or offends you, and then he or she apologizes and asks for forgiveness, the biblical requirement is that forgiveness must be granted. There is no other option.

But I have to say that there are other parts of the Bible where Jesus went further than today's reading in talking about forgiveness.

Elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel Jesus spoke more generally and said, "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (6:14-15). There is no reference or limitation here to brothers and sisters.

And in another part of Luke's Gospel Jesus taught, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (6:37). Again, this is a more universal statement that does not seem to be limited to fellow Christians.

So, it is apparent that forgiveness has more than one meaning, and can be understood in different ways in different situations. Let's look at some of them.

III.

What if someone we don't even know sincerely asks forgiveness for a wrong done to us? And perhaps that person is not a believer at all, but yet is sorry and wants us to forgive them. The answer, according to these other passages, is we are called to give it, and to accept that person in Christ's love. And an important factor is that the other person has asked for forgiveness.

And in a variation on that issue, what about people we know and with whom we relate who we think have done us wrong, but they do not want forgiveness because they think they are in the right and we're wrong. They think we're at fault, and might even be offended if we spoke words of forgiveness to them.

Again, we still are called to act in Christ's love. We can pray for them, be open to reconciliation, and try to patch things up. We are not, however, required to become doormats or let people mistreat us. This leads to how today's Gospel and the biblical requirement of forgiveness apply to the events we remember today.

What do we do about people who hurt us and don't want forgiveness? What about those who have not asked for our forgiveness, will not ask for it, and would not accept it if it were offered? How do we forgive the terrorists of September 11, and violent criminals, ruthless dictators, and those without any sense of social responsibility who do evil in the world?

Well, we still are called to forgive all of them. But what does that kind of forgiveness look like? I would say that forgiveness has a different meaning, a different definition, in those situations. It is not the same, for example, as when we forgive a friend or family member.

That's because God does not expect us to take passive view of terrorists, criminals, or other evil people. We are not expected to be sympathetic to terrorists. We do not have to tell people that it's all right when they harm us. We always are called to seek justice, and our nation properly sought justice in the aftermath of September 11.

I might tell a story to help make the point. There was a fellow who sent a money order to the Internal Revenue Service for back taxes, along with an anonymous note that said, "I feel guilty about cheating on my taxes, and have to send this payment to you. If it doesn't make me feel any better, I will send you the rest."

We see that this fellow was concerned about how he felt. But that is not helpful to today's discussion. Forgiveness of truly evil people is not about us or how we feel; it begins with our relationship with God. And that involves the first Great Commandment, to love God. And loving God means having a relationship with God.

One image of that relationship might be as a pipeline, or a channel, or a conduit that connects us with God. Through this pipeline we can receive a sense of God's will for us and can partake of his blessings.

But what if that pipeline gets clogged? What if secular cholesterol has built up and gotten in the way of the healthy flow of the spiritual life blood of a true and faithful relationship with God? And by secular cholesterol I mean things such as hatred and bitterness, a thirst for revenge, or a consuming desire to get even with people such as the 9/11 terrorists.

God asks us to love him with open hearts. We cannot do that if we are filled with hatred, anger, or malice toward others, no matter who they are, even if it seems justified.

And purging ourselves of these destructive emotions is not approval of wrongs that have been done, but rather removal of obstacles in our relationships with God.

That's what forgiveness means in our attitudes toward people who don't want it. We cleanse our hearts from hatred or ill-will even though the realities of injustice might remain. We do it to purify ourselves, not to absolve others. Un-Christian feelings will clog up our pipeline to God.

V.

So we see that forgiveness takes several forms. Through God's grace we are forgiven in ways that enable us to be transformed into new persons.

But God's forgiveness also is something we pass on to others who truly seek it. And for those who reject it we still must forbear feelings of ill-will that interfere with own relationships with God. God calls us to cleanse our own hearts, even though we know that the hearts of terrorists and evildoers might be black as coal.

Then St. Paul's words to the Romans can be our guide. He said, "All things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (8:28). Forgiveness is an essential component of things working together, and it leads us to be fulfilled and enriched in our new lives in Jesus Christ. *Amen.*