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“Forgiveness in a Family”

Romans 14:1, 4 – 5, 10 – 12

Matthew 18:21 - 35

Text: “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we all stand before the judgment seat of God.”
... Romans 14:10

Ten years ago today life as we had come to know it was shattered. Planes were hijacked; two were flown into the World Trade Towers, one into the Pentagon Building, and another crashed on an unknown mission, presumably somewhere in Washington, D.C. It didn't take long to discover that Al Qaida was behind it. It was an organized attempt by Osama Bin Laden and his followers to strike fear in the hearts, and to totally disrupt the economic lifeblood of the United States and its allies.

You remember that day well – you remember where you were, you remember how you reacted: and unfortunately, you probably knew, at least tangentially, someone who died. The company Debbie worked for lost 297 employees when the first plane to crash into the World Trade Center; and at the time she worked on the 38th floor of the tallest building in Boston.

Our reactions were immediate. In the moments that followed there was confusion – there was fear. What would be the appropriate response – revenge, retaliation, some sort of measured response?

Prayer services were held. There was mourning for the thousands who died. Church attendance spiked for about a month. Most people were determined to show the world that they would not live in fear and that the terrorist attacks not deter our lives. In the midst of the terror, the anger, somehow, my gut told me that somehow, forgiveness was eventually going to be needed.

In the days that followed that turned into weeks and then months, our country gradually returned to a “new kind of normalcy.” Going to the airport would never again be the same. As the country sought to do battle with the extremist group Al Qaida, we soon found ourselves in armed conflict in Iraq, and in several countries to their East. Our economy and debt levels changed, perhaps forever. And we are not out of the woods yet.

This morning, on the tenth anniversary of 9/11, I have chosen to begin a three-part sermon series on family – what is a family, and how does a family behave. Admittedly there are many kinds of families – traditional (the mom, dad, sis, and junior kind), single parent families, extended families, global families, all of which may be more or less functional than others. But I will, over the next four weeks, try to focus on some of the Biblical examples of family; and how God would like the human family, each and every

human being alive, be part of the fabric that is woven into a cloth that makes the family of God.

Perhaps today's place to begin is providentially divine – for the lectionary this week focuses on forgiveness. The text is Matthew 18:21-35—the famous passage where Jesus instructs Peter on the new math of forgiveness. It's a familiar enough story: a servant is forgiven an outrageous sum of money by his master, and the servant promptly responds by refusing to forgive his fellow man a paltry amount in comparison. The lesson is obvious: we ought to forgive as we have been forgiven. More disturbingly, perhaps, is when Jesus adds that our refusal to forgive will block us from receiving the forgiveness of God.

Perhaps on this day, ten years later, this lesson is particularly difficult. And perhaps on this day, ten years later, this is the Biblical lesson most pertinent to our faith. To be sure, it's difficult for us to understand the radical nature of the commandment that Jesus was giving the Peter and the disciples. Seven times? No, said Jesus, 70 times seven times. Four hundred ninety times? What about al-Qaeda terrorists, who continue to plan violent and disruptive attacks on innocent people?

Jesus clearly knew the limits of perfect forgiveness as imagined by humans. Jesus knew that we justify our failures to forgive in the face of another person's unreasonableness. Jesus knew that we give up on our concept of forgiveness too quickly. But Jesus' response rejected our excuses and expanded the limits of forgiveness beyond any horizon.

What Jesus is trying to help understand is that we should be so generous of heart as to forgive beyond our ability to count. Those who keep counting are, in a sense, not forgiving their neighbor. They are merely collecting offenses, allowing them to accrue until the accumulation is so great even the most righteous person would see the obvious need to undertake some sort of earthly retribution.

Let's look in on the parable:

There is a king who wants to settle accounts with his servants. So he calls in one who owes him 10,000 talents. How much is a talent? About a year's wage. 10,000 years of working. That's a lot; even at minimum wages by my rough calculations that would come to about \$145,000,000 in today's economy. The servant couldn't pay it. At first the King ordered the servant to be sold (along with his wife and children and all his possessions). Then the servant begs the king to give him another chance and he will pay him everything. And, lo and behold, out of pity for him, the King released the servant and forgave him. The \$145 million slate was wiped clean!

Not long after this same servant, fresh from having a \$145 million debt forgiven, discovers that one of his underlings owes him 100 denarii – about 100 days wage or using the same minimum wage parameters, about \$5,800 – a considerable amount by most of our standards; but a paltry sum compared to the \$145 million. This servant, the one forgiven by the king grabs his servant by the throat and told him to pay what he owed. The slave couldn't. And our forgiven servant ordered the slave to be put in prison until he would pay the debt.

When all the other slaves saw this they reported it to the king. And this is how the king responded: “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” And in anger he turned him over to be tortured.

Which person in the story do you like? The king? The first slave who was forgiven \$145 million? Or the poor slave who was thrown in jail for not being able to pay back the \$5800 he owed – to someone who had \$145 million forgiven. . . . O K, I slanted the question a bit.

The first servant’s behavior is particularly scandalous because his debt was about 25,000 times greater than that of the man he’s punishing. Why does the first servant show no emotion, no sign of deep gratitude, no empathy? How can the experience of “unprecedented” forgiveness of his debt have no influence on his attitude toward his colleague? We find ourselves resenting the ungracious servant’s response, and we approve of the king who revokes his leniency with this man and sends him to be tortured.

But then Jesus concludes the parable with these words – and as Jesus often does, everything shifts from the servant to us: “So my God in heaven will also do to every one of you, *if* you do *not* forgive your brother and sister **from your heart.**” All of a sudden, we are expelled from the comfortable seats and find that this story may well be ours. There is something about this that doesn’t seem right, and we protest. Jesus commands us to forgive our brother and sister “as God has forgiven us,” and then says that if we do not forgive, “God will not forgive us.”

We remember other biblical texts written in the same vein: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” (Matt. 6:12); “With the judgment you make you will be judged” (Matt. 7:1-2); “In passing judgment on another you condemn yourself” (Rom. 2:1); and “Who are you to judge your neighbor?” (James 4:12). In the last analysis, what is at stake is human forgiveness, which is preceded and empowered by God’s forgiveness, but which at the same time solidifies God’s forgiveness.

However we come to terms with the harsh words of Jesus that close Matthew 18, we cannot escape the truth that forgiveness matters *deeply* to God. It’s also brutally hard, as anyone who has attempted to forgive knows well.

We have all heard the phrase “to err is human, but to forgive is divine”, and perhaps dismissed it by acknowledging our humanness over the divinity with which we also have been created as part of God’s image. But to fulfill our creation in God’s image we also need to tap into the “divine” part of our creation. It transcends us. As we work for forgiveness, we are called to reflect that as human beings, each of us is created in the image of God.

At the end of the day, though, I think it is a testament to the dignity of human beings that we can choose to transcend our instinctual needs for revenge, to be proven right, or to mask our own fears, insecurities, and prejudices, by choosing to forgive. We can choose the harder path that leads to life, and in so doing show what we were made for, and by Whom.

But let's not sugarcoat it – forgiveness is not easy. Peter was the closest disciple of Christ, yet he was not seasoned in faith enough to come up with anything more than a humanly reasonable approach to forgiveness. One's obligation, so he reasoned, is complete when you have bent over backwards for someone seven times. Perhaps he reasoned that seven is a biblically “divine” number. However, God asks more. That's the hard part.

But the good part is that God gives more. The parable of the unforgiving servant, with its extravagant exaggeration, can only be fully understood in light of Christ's death and resurrection. What might have sounded like grand hyperbole to Peter was finally borne out by Jesus when he gave up his life for all the sins of **all** generations in **all** the world.

Numbers can't get at the infinity of offenses Jesus' death has covered, nor the countless souls it has redeemed. Jesus' words proved accurate after all: such is the kingdom of heaven, where all sins are forgiven by an incalculably gracious God. Living in that love releases in us the possibility to understand God's family in a whole new light. And God's family? It is not just us. It is not just people like us. It is about every person, all created by God.

Forgiveness may not come naturally, but such is the new life in being part of the family of Christ. It gives us the clarity and conviction to live as Jesus taught, and to pray for a gracious heart when it seems impossible to forgive.

Family. Back where I started. For us truly to be a family as God intends we are called to forgive in every aspect of our life. To forgive our brothers and sisters. To forgive our parents. To forgive our children. To forgive our church family. To forgive all of God's family.

Forgiveness may not come naturally, but that's the way it is to be in God's family. Forgiveness is essential to God's family. And today we expand our definition of family to understand that God created the whole world and every person in it. We are all part of God's creation – a creation God looked at and called it “Good!” We are a part of that family.

When I was touring the art museum that used to be the National Palace of Nicaragua with the Feb, 2009 delegation, I was struck by the murals, vividly colorful expressions of a passionate history. Nicaragua has known its share of devastation – by nature with earthquakes and volcanoes, and by human action; devastating economic embargos and wars from within and without.

Nicaragua's recent history has been somewhat defined by the earthquake of 1972 that destroyed the capital city of Managua. There are two murals that vertically flank either side of a second story doorway. One shows the horror of people in the midst of the devastating 1972 earthquake. On the other side is a mural that was completed in 2001 depicting the rebuilding of Managua. While the artist was finishing this mural 9-11 took place. The artist then included the planes flying into the World Trade Center as a symbol of unity; from a people that had known devastation and had to rebuild.

Is there forgiveness in this? Yes! And there is a strong notion of a human family being built; country by country, strand by strand, as God works through our sisters and brothers across the globe.

Especially on this day, the tenth anniversary of 9 – 11, a day of remembrance; let us remember that God calls us to forgive.