

Sermon for Sept. 11th 2011 Matthew 18
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In honor of those who lost their lives 10 years ago today on Sept. 11th 2001 and those who have given and continue to give their lives because of that day let us pause now for a moment of prayerful silence.

Most of us, at least those of us who are old enough, remember where we were during this morning exactly 10 years ago. My husband Todd and I were at work at an insurance company in a suburb of Chicago and our then two-year-old daughter, Amanda was happily playing with her friends at her day care. Word starting going around the office that something had happened in New York and eventually we all started gathering in the conference room to watch the news. Surreal is the word that comes to mind as I think back on how I was feeling when watching that TV screen and seeing the plane fly into the second tower and seeing people jumping from the towers and seeing the towers collapse. I was utterly stunned to silence, just like all of my coworkers around me.

Shortly thereafter in and around the city of Chicago, there was great fear that a plane was coming toward one of the their own skyscrapers. The city's public transportation system was shut down. The city was evacuated.

Everyone in this country was affected that day in some way or another. Certainly those who have lost friends, family, colleagues and loved ones and those who have served or continue to serve in the military or family members thereof continue to live with the aftermath of that day on a daily basis.

Although 10 years have gone by the emotions and pain of one of this countries darkest days in history are still on the surface for so many people. This makes our gospel lesson for this morning all the more challenging.

Then Peter came and said to Jesus "Lord, if someone sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus' response, not seven, Peter, seventy seven times, also in some versions seventy times seven times.

This answer from Jesus is clearly not about arithmetic – seventy-seven or seventy times seven is a symbolic number. It means to infinity or without limits. The point Jesus is making is that putting a limit on forgiveness is out of bounds.

Behind peter's question, "lord how many" are several different possible concerns. Certainly experience in our society now and during Peter's time suggests that there must be limits to bad behavior. Peter may be asking "if my friend insults me repeatedly, must I go on suffering this indignity just because she says sorry?" Or peter may be asking, 'is it really in the best interest of my brother for me to go on tolerating his bad behavior when it is clear that his repentance is superficial and he has no intention of changing?' or Peter may be asking "what they did was so horrific how could it possibly be forgivable?"

Most of us can relate to this question of Peter's. Most of us have had people harm us and say they are sorry and then harm us in the same way again.

Many people in this world have been hurt by such wrongful things that forgiveness does not seem like an option. These are legitimate concerns, and Jesus' answer in today's gospel lesson does not appear to address them which makes it difficult for us to understand.

First of all, it is important for us realize that Jesus does address those type of concerns in other parts of the

gospel, and secondly how the offender is dealt with is not the point Jesus is making when he is saying there is no limit to forgiveness to Peter. Forgiveness does not mean that there will be no consequences for the offender to pay. Jesus is addressing Peter's own heart and how it will help Peter to be able to forgive limitlessly.

In today's gospel in his response to Peter, Jesus is saying that even when dealing with the stubbornly unrepentant, or the insincere, or the worst case offenders for our own good we must forego vindictiveness in our own hearts and, by God's grace, give evidence that we ourselves are ready to extend forgiveness because we ourselves have been humbled by God's forgiveness and grace.

There was an excellent article in the opinions page of the Wall Street Journal on Friday written by Tim Townsend, titled "can we forgive?" Townsend begins by talking about a priest he met 10 years ago today while he was standing next to him on the street watching the twin towers go down. The priest's name is father Ryan and Townsend tracked down Fr. Ryan recently and interviewed him. Townsend says this in the article... "I tracked down Fr. Ryan, and spoke to him in his office at St. James of the Marches parish in N.J. I asked him—the son and grandson of New York City cops from Staten Island—if it was time now to forgive. "You forgive the person behind the act," he said. "You either do that, or your hate eventually consumes you."

"If Jesus could forgive the people who murdered him, there's something in that model that should apply to all of us," Fr. Ryan said. "I don't understand it all, but I'm willing to follow that model based on everything else I know and believe."

In the gospel lesson we just heard, to Peter's credit he did expand on the idea of forgiveness, but he is still thinking in terms of measurable mercy, not unlimited grace. So Jesus goes on to tell yet another parable. A parable in which at the base level is about the true experience of grace. Like the king in the story, God has compassion for human failures and like the king God acts more graciously than we could ever expect. The servant who owed an impossible debt simply asked for more time to pay what he owed but the king compassionately and graciously forgave the entire debt.

When we experience and accept that type of grace we are transformed and that grace in turn brings about more grace.

When we allow God's grace to affect our lives we will live differently in relation to others. When we do not accept this grace, as the forgiven servant did not, we will not be fully able to share grace and forgiveness and we become trapped in a cycle of hurt and dismay and fear. Hate eventually consumes us and we in essence are punishing ourselves.

Jesus died on a cross to let us know what it means to be forgiven and to forgive. Forgiveness means to release, to let go of the pain the other has caused. Sometimes it can take a long time. Often times you feel like you have conquered it and then the anger and hurt come rushing back so you have to ask God for help again and again. Jesus speaks to the necessity of forgiveness because he knows the effect unforgiveness has on individuals and communities and Jesus speaks of grace because he knows that with the grace of God forgiveness happens and with that comes peace.

I was watching an interview on the news a couple of days ago. The newscaster was interviewing the retired catholic bishop of New York Cardinal Edward Egan, who was the bishop on Sept. 11th 2001. Cardinal Egan talked about grace without actually mentioning the word grace. He talked about how on 9/11 and thereafter he learned what courage, nobility of soul, and true self –sacrifice were in watching all those who lost their lives trying to save the lives of others. He said while he was in lower Manhattan blessing and anointing, consoling and encouraging he was the one being blessed by the wonderful, workers. He said that amidst that tragedy it was a time of inspiration and a time of real holiness and a real and deep reliance on faith.

That is the meaning of God's grace... a grace that indeed brings about more grace.

In the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans that we heard this morning we hear in Paul's passion the spirit of God's grace. We hear it in those beautiful words that we recite each and every time we have a funeral service....words from our Epistle today – a day in which we remember and honor so many – We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live we live to the lord and if we die we die to the lord so that whether we live or die we are the lords.”

We indeed are the Lord's whether we live or whether we die. We are children of a god who forgives us seventy time seven, who loves us so much he sent his son to live love die and rise for us and who in both times of joy and times of sorrow continues to pour out grace upon grace.