

The Church of the Holy Cross  
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### **Forgiveness After 9/11**

*Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.*

The next verse in Scripture reads: “Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: ‘I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea...Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he cast into the sea; his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone.’”

When Osama bin Laden was killed earlier this year a huge crowd amassed outside the White house and chanted a familiar song: “U-S-A! U-S-A!” Perhaps they remembered Moses and the Israelites singing about all the dead Egyptians that washed ashore from the Red Sea. 9/11 had been avenged finally: death for death. Blood vengeance had been satisfied.

The early rabbis as it turned out disliked this passage from Exodus, and argued about it in commentary called midrash. In one story from the Babylonian Talmud angels were watching as the sea covered the Egyptians, and the commentary reads: "In that instant (of the Egyptians’ demise) the ministering angels wished to utter song before the Holy One, but He rebuked them, saying, 'The works of My hands are drowning in the sea, and you would utter song in My presence!'" Over the years this midrash has been retold with God rebuking not only the angels, but the Israelites themselves.

There are of course lingering questions: How could the God who made men and women in his own image, who takes pains to teach his people care of strangers, foreigners, and exiles--who works through non-Israelites like Naaman and Rahab and Babylonians and the Syro-Phoenician woman and Roman centurions and Gentiles—how could this God cause the death of Egyptians, even if they were enemies? The rabbis who studied this text with reverence refused to delight in death and destruction because they knew their God too well. Yes, they heard the exodus story of God’s power to deliver against all odds, but they also heard God chastising angels and chastising people for singing the glories of death in victory.

I remember coming out of my seminary class the morning of September 11, 2001 to ash falling like snow everywhere, covering our hair and cars and buildings and streets in New Haven, CT. The wind was blowing north that morning. We had heard the news and in numb shock we gathered outside in a circle of prayer and lifted up our hearts, lifted up our hearts unto the Lord. We prayed that the Easter Christ who broke free from death’s hold would cast out all fear and fill the victims, the survivors, us, the perpetrators, the world with his healing power.

Later that year a visiting preacher told the story of Martin Luther King standing in the ashes of 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama after Ku Klux Klan members had blown it up on a Sunday morning, killing four young girls during their Sunday School. When King stood up to speak, the embers from the fire were still smoldering, but he preached an Easter sermon. Years later a member of the church was asked what King said when he faced down evil and death with the power of the risen Christ, and the man said he didn’t remember exactly—but he remembered where he said it. I don’t remember exactly what we prayed to our Easter Lord on that 9/11 morning, but I remember where we prayed it.

What I remember more clearly than September 11 is September 12 and 13 and 14 and 15--and the weeks following: the new closeness among friends and acquaintances, the startling gentleness

among New Yorkers of all people, the sincere truce between warring political parties, the human warmth with people who we didn't know and who didn't know us, the feeling of unimagined unity with people all over the world. It was in these first days that President Bush visited the mosque in the Islamic Center of Washington, DC to remind an angry and frightened nation that "the face of terror is not the true faith of Islam." The foundations of life had been tragically shaken by death, but what crumbled with the twin towers were all the walls that had separated us.

Ten years and two wars later, how the scene has changed.

The newspapers this past week promise that clergy will explain why 9-11 happened—the problem of evil, or theodicy. To be honest I do not think this is a helpful approach. The fact is there are destructive forces in the world that delight in crucifying. Jesus rebuked them, muzzled them, was killed by them, and then rose from death to rule over them. He gave us the power to rebuke and muzzle them. Scripture calls them Legion or "the satan" or principalities and powers: spiritual forces within and behind systems that corrupt and destroy human life. Point is, we the church have a role to play in proclaiming the limits of their power.

And then there are destructive powers in the human heart. Jesus puts it simply: "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." Reformers called it concupiscence, which Martin Luther described as "a nausea toward the good, a loathing of light and wisdom, and a delight in error and darkness." There is not a human being alive who has not felt the rush of satisfaction when the person you can't stand gets what's coming to him. This is not a Muslim problem or a Christian problem or an Arab problem or an American problem—it is a human problem.

What is far more helpful is to hear the reality of God as it is revealed in the person of Jesus, and to find our place in this reality. And so we turn to the portion of Matthew's Gospel for today.

Peter approaches Jesus and asks a question about the limits of forgiveness. It's a good question, a practical question: If a brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive—as many as seven times? The implication here is the new rules for the church as an alternative community to the dominant culture. The generous standard was four times, but Peter guesses almost double this. Jesus' response reveals that Peter's question misses the mark. "Not seven times," Jesus replies, "but I tell you, seventy-seven times." Another translation reads "seventy times seven." His point reflects the parable of the lost sheep: whatever you have to do to get that one lost sheep back in the fold, do it.

We don't get a description of Peter's face when he hears this, but you can imagine the shock and dismay—and the sinking feeling—from an impossible task. Perhaps sensing this, Jesus tells a parable.

Forgiveness in the parable is not about personal insult or offense, but rather is about the release of crushing financial debt. The sum of ten thousand talents is unimaginably large—one talent was apparently several years' worth of wages, so multiply a lot by ten thousand talent and you get the idea. The estimated period of repayment is well beyond a lifetime. The slave makes a futile plea for patience as though this would help. But the king has pity, which is a thin translation of a complex emotion: he is deeply moved or literally feels a stirring in his intestines on behalf of the slave. Instead of merely offering more time, the king releases the burden altogether in an act of extravagant generosity. The extravagance of the king is contrasted with the harshness of the slave who on his way home to tell his family the good news demands from a fellow slave an immediate repayment of one day's wage. In a terrifying turn of events, the forgiven slave is caught in his small-heartedness and handed over to torture in prison. The parable ends with the threat of similar judgment for any and all who show similar harshness, similar smallness of heart.

Let us not mince words here. The parable reveals an unworldly ethic of compassion to strive for, and severe judgment if we fall short. The truth is that God's reality does not fit our ability or even our willingness. We have all harbored grudges, held onto the smallest of injustices, demanded the little that we are owed with impatience, watered our fears and insecurities and wounds, lorded over those who "owe us". No amount of human gumption, belief in the goodness of ourselves, a "try harder" attitude will get us to the place of seven times forgiveness, much less seventy-seven times. There is real sin which we cannot save ourselves from—a hardness of heart, and we have not even entered the world of forgiveness on a national stage. There is as the Apostle Paul knew and experienced, "a law in our members which wars against the law that is in our mind."

The good news of the gospel is not the law that we ought to love one another or forgive one another. It is not the hope in the goodness of the human spirit that if we only screwed up all our best intentions we can do it. This would be to deny the reality of sin that has scarred the landscape of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Modernist belief in the death of evil and beneficence of man has utterly failed. The good news of the gospel is that there is a resource of divine mercy which is able to overcome the contradiction within our own souls, which we cannot ourselves overcome. Because of God's grace, because we stand forgiven by the extravagant mercy of God in Jesus Christ, because of what God has already given us, already achieved for us, therefore forgiveness to God's standard in Jesus is something we can do. Therefore we can sing to then Lord a new song: one with lyrics like "It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer" together with "Victory is mine; victory is mine; victory today is mine. I told satan, get thee behind, victory today is mine."