

September 11, 2011 Sermon Notes

It's been a decade. It's been 10 years
since the horrific events of September 11, 2001.
And, the events are still
as fresh on our minds
as if they had taken place yesterday.

The large-scale killing that happened
was no doubt horrific and devastating.
It was so awful
that we've added it to the long list
of the worst nightmares in our world's history.
And, it was so atrocious
that we might even be tempted
to label it "unforgivable".
Yet, today's Gospel lesson
turns our minds and hearts
toward forgiveness.

In this story, Peter asks Jesus,
"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me,
how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"
And Jesus says to him,
"Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."
Then Jesus goes on to tell the story of a man who is in debt.
But this man is not just in any ordinary kind of debt;
he has worked himself into an impossible amount of money to repay.
As another homilist observes:
"Biblical scholar, Eugene Boring, has calculated
that as King Herod's annual income from all taxes
from all his territories was a mere 900 talents per year,
the 10,000 talents would exceed all of the taxes
of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria as well.
The parable is hyperbole; no servant could amass a debt so large.
Then, when the king cancels the debt,
the man, now free from the burden,
goes out to demand payment from someone
who owes him a debt equal to a hundred days' wages."
(9/11/11 Sermons That Work)
The slave ends the cycle of forgiveness the king had begun.

The King finds out and responds: "You wicked slave!
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?"

The point is clear and simple.
We have gotten ourselves into insurmountable trouble.
Yet God has forgiven us more than we could EVER repay.
God has forgiven us so much
that the only response is to turn around and forgive others
when they hurt us, no matter how small or how great the hurt is.
It's simple and reasonable concept, but as we see in the story,
it can be a pretty hard thing for us to do.
Like the man in the Gospel, we don't actually deserve forgiveness.
Forgiveness is not a right we earn but a gift we receive.
It's a gift given by God to help us find our way back to him.
I think the meaning of forgiveness is really hard for us
to get our heads around.
Either that or I don't explain it very well :-)
because never do I get more questions and comments
on my sermons from you all
than when I preach on forgiveness!
Seriously, the last time I preached on forgiveness,
I got a great question:
"If you forgive a person, but cannot trust them,
have you really forgiven them?"
How do you trust someone who could backslide at any time?
If you are always waiting for the other shoe to drop,
how can that be forgiveness?
I confess that I still have not come up with an answer that satisfies
the questioner OR me!
But I put this before you to show you just how complicated
the definition of forgiveness can get
and to ask you to consider it in your reflections.

I'm not convinced forgiveness necessarily means we trust again.
I don't think forgiveness and reconciliation are one and the same.
But I am certain that forgiveness does NOT mean
we decide the offense is somehow right or "okay" now.
I think forgiveness means we just don't hang on to the hate we feel

because of the offense anymore.
And we throw away our desire for retribution.
We crumble it up and toss it into the garbage can.
If we don't let go of the hate and the "debt",
we just become slaves to the "debt"
and remain caught in the cycle of violence,
which drives and dominates our world.
And our hopes and dreams for the future vanish.
Our future becomes the same as our present and past.
Things will never change.
As Archbishop Desmond Tutu puts it,
"There is no future without forgiveness."
And, there will never be peace
and trust or reconciliation without forgiveness.

Now, the most significant event related to 9/11
that has occurred over the past 10 years
is, of course, the capture and death of Osama bin Laden.
In the news and on social networking sites like Facebook,
we saw a range of feelings and emotions.
There was relief: He can't do anything to hurt us any more.
There was joy: In some places like Washington DC,
celebrations broke out in the streets.
Some questioned the celebrations: Should we be celebrating death,
even the death of a vicious enemy?
There has been uneasiness and "unsettled feelings."
Questions as to whether or not
we should have killed bin Laden were raised
by leaders like the Archbishop of Canterbury.

There's a lot to talk about and sort out when it comes to these issues.
But even though bin Laden's death caused some relief and even some joy,
bin Laden's death hasn't healed us or solved the problem.
There's still something more to deal with.
9/11 and bin Laden's death point to a larger problem in our world,
a problem that we, as Christians, cannot ignore.
This situation points to the world's inability, our inability
to deal with peacemaking
in creative and imaginative ways.

bin Laden obviously lacked the imagination

to deal reasonably and creatively
with his feelings of hate.
And because of the fear and terror
his actions caused us,
we became locked into a mission to capture him.
We lacked the imagination
to do anything else.

Now, I am not saying that we were wrong
to capture or even to kill bin Laden,
It's devastating to think let alone say,
but how else are we really going to deal
with a terrorist like bin Laden at this time anyway?
I don't know.

And none of us was there to know why
the Navy Seals decided to kill bin Laden.
We don't really know what the situation was,
and we will probably never know.
We don't have all the information,
so I'm not really sure we can decide
whether it was right or wrong, justified or not.

What I am saying is that we live in cycles of violence,
we get caught and stuck in cycles of violence
because we lack the imagination to
effectively create peace in our world.
There is no doubt we face serious challenges
to peacemaking in our world.
Peace is certainly the goal for Christians,
but the reality is that peace is not the goal for everyone.
That doesn't get us off the hook though—
how do we engage people whose goal is not peace
and for whom hate and violence is acceptable?
This is a question we must unfortunately grapple with.

I wonder what is it going to take.
What is it going to take
to unlock the world's imagination?
To unlock our imagination?
What is it going to take

for us to become the peacemakers
Christ called us to be?

I don't know,
but I think it starts with forgiveness.
It think it starts with our willingness
to let go of hate,
hate that may be justified
and hate that doesn't deserve to be forgiven,
but hate that fuels even more hate and even more violence.

Our forgiving, the forgiveness we give
will never be total, complete, and perfect
like God's forgiveness is,
but I'm willing to bet our forgiving
will free us - both the offender and the offended-
it will free us just enough
that one day, one day
one forgiven by another
will turn around and forgive someone else
who will feel so thankful that he goes on to forgive yet another.
And then maybe some day,
we will work our way into a cycle of forgiveness
and break the cycle of violence.