

We are the Lord's
13 Pentecost, Year A
September 11, 2011: The Rev Judi Sato
Matthew 18:21-35 – 10th Anniversary of 9/11

This is one of those Sundays that is filled with activities, remembrances, and rich scriptural images that it may seem none of them are related, but I believe there is a common theme here that we can explore.

In Exodus we have the images of a cloud and a pillar of fire that protected the Israelites in their journey in the desert. We have God saving the Israelites from the Egyptian army with a wall of water. These days, walls of water, fire, clouds of dust – they do not invoke the image of God, but images of natural disasters and acts of terrorism. But after all that - look at the last line of our reading in Exodus – “so the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.” The people believed in the Lord – not the pillar of fire, not the cloud, not the wall of water – but the Lord.

In Romans we are encouraged not to pass judgment on those whose faith is different than ours, on those whose eating habits are different than ours. We are not to despise our brother and our sister. All we do is for the Lord – whether we live or die. No matter what – we are the Lord's because of what Christ did for us on the cross. A good lesson for us today – for those we may distrust because their faith may be different from ours.

And then we have the gospel and Christ's lesson on forgiveness. When Peter asked Jesus how often we are to forgive – seven times? That is not a measly number. In Hebrew – numbers have a significant meaning. The number seven signifies completeness and perfection as in the number of days of creation. When Jesus says, not seven times – but 77 times - he is saying forgiveness is so important we are **always** to forgive. And then he gives us a parable showing us that forgiveness is a doorway to our relationship with God.

The parable also implies that while forgiveness can be called for, it can't be forced. I know that I -- and I suspect that each of you -- have at one time or another gotten "stuck" by some offense or personal slight and overlooked the manifold grace extended to me by others. Then we keep playing that grievance over and over in our mind. Perhaps Jesus commands such extravagant forgiveness because he knows it may take some of us that long for it to really sink home.

Let me tell you a story of forgiveness in my own life.

Our daughter Noelle is adopted. She is Korean by birth. Around the age of 10 she said she separated herself from the family. She was confused by her identity and she did not want to be adopted. We knew something was wrong and had started to see counselors. The first one didn't work at all. By the age of 15 she was starting to act out and getting into all sorts of trouble. We started seeing another counselor and I started praying. I didn't ask for this burden to go away. I knew this was going to take time. So I prayed – God what do you want me to learn from this? For a year or so there wasn't any change. Noelle would always do her worst

on significant days like my birthday, Mother's Day, Father's day, etc. What I eventually realized was I needed to be a different Mom than I was for our two older children. I needed to love her differently. I made the goal that I would not give up on our relationship. In order to keep that relationship, I needed to forgive her. When she would get into trouble, we would discipline her. But then the next morning I would treat her as the precious child that she was. I did not stay angry or hold a grudge. I forgave her. I also stopped sitting on pins and needles waiting for the next battle because I knew there was nothing I could do to prevent it. This was very freeing. To my husband this looked like I was naïve and letting her run all over me. But that wasn't what was happening. After awhile, I wasn't as deeply wounded each time she acted out against me. I was getting stronger. I was recovering faster and able to really start caring for her again. I was able to really be there for Noelle. Slowly she started confiding in me. She started to cooperate with the counselor. We had a critical moment when Noelle had to decide if she wanted to be a member of the family or just someone living at the house. She decided she wanted to be a part of our family. I received a note from her later thanking me for listening to her, for hanging in there and wanting to be her mother. God taught me how to forgive. He taught me how to forgive 77 times. Each time I did – I got stronger. It was about my forgiveness. My healing. And because I was healed – it gave Noelle the space to work on her own healing.

My experience helped me understand what forgiveness is and what it is not. This was later enhanced when I studied the work of Dr. Fred Luskin, author of the Forgiveness Project at Stanford University. This is what I learned:

What Forgiveness is not:

- Forgiveness is not condoning unkindness or illegal behavior directed towards us. We dealt with each incident of bad behavior with appropriate punishment
- Forgiveness is not forgetting that something painful happened. It's not easy to forget when it happens on your birthday.
- Forgiveness is not excusing poor behavior.
- Forgiveness is not denying or minimizing your hurt.
- Forgiveness does not mean reconciling with the offender. This is sometimes not possible – at least not right away
- Forgiveness does not mean you give up having feelings.

What Forgiveness is:

- Forgiveness is the peace you learn to feel when you stop paying attention to your unresolved grievances. *I could not keep a running total of everything she did.*
- Forgiveness is for you and not the offender. *It was about letting go of the past, changing my present, and protecting my future. It's about making a better life for myself.*
- Forgiveness is taking back your power. *It is not living in the past – but looking to the present.*
- Forgiveness is taking responsibility for how I felt. *I had to admit I was hurt – and I would tell her that.*

- Forgiveness is about your healing and not about the people who hurt you. *I had to forgive for my own sanity because it wasn't working any other way.*
- Forgiveness is a trainable skill. *It took me awhile to get the hang of it. Having some friends I could talk to (plus the counselor) really helped.*
- Forgiveness is becoming a hero instead of a victim. *A chief example – the Creation of MADD*
- Forgiveness is a choice. *We can choose to be bitter – or we can choose to be better.*
- There is no timetable to forgiveness. *It took us four years.*

Because of my experience – I understand why forgiveness is so important to God. God loves us so much he is willing to forgive our sins so that we can be in relationship with Him and with one another. I became a new person through this experience. I became stronger and more loving than I was before. It changed me for the better.

Forgiveness is healing and peace – not condoning bad behavior
 Forgiveness is saying my relationship with God and others is more important than pride and ego.

This Sunday we will take time with our prayers to remember the events of September 11 a decade ago when four hijacked airplanes wreaked such destruction and woe. Calamities provide major historical markers, but they are too big to make sense of our daily lives. And so out of necessity we find other markers -- birthdays, graduations, milestones of various sorts -- to chart the passage of time, and we look to the mundane events of everyday life for the evidences of grace that sustain us in the here and now. This is why we are celebrating families today with our Bar-B-Que.

If our God was only God during the good times, when we are all prosperous and happy, we wouldn't have much of a God at all. God is God all the time, in good times and in bad. It is through God's grace of forgiveness that enables us to hold on to God and to each other.

So instead of looking back 10 years let us remember the events of 2000 years ago when God's own Son, surveying a field of broken lives and desolate hearts, chose to call down from heaven forgiveness, not vengeance, and in this way opened a future marked not by judgment but by mercy, not by despair but hope, not by fear but courage, not by violence but healing, not by hate but love, and not by death but by new life. That's what forgiveness can do.

The Israelites believed in the Lord. Paul told us that no matter what, we are the Lord's. Forgiveness is our witness to the world of a God of Mercy and of Love. Let us celebrate *that* today. *Amen.*