

Pentecost A – 13, Lect. 24, Proper 19, '11  
Matt. 18:21-35  
9/11/11  
Trinity Lutheran Congregation  
Pastor Jane Buckley-Farlee

If you don't know what today is you haven't been paying attention. The 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of 9/11, 2001. I've lost count of the number of news articles, radio and TV programs that have been available in the last month. How many front pages of magazines and newspapers have reminded us of the events of that day. And how many opinions have been shared, how many reflections how many thought-provoking columns, blogs and emails have been coming into our lives. How many events in memory of the day and those who died are in our communities. I've lost track and I've wondered if there could possibly be anything left to say or think or do?

And then, what will tomorrow bring? Will it just be another September 12<sup>th</sup>? Will it be like December 26, when people rush to the stores to return those gifts they didn't really like or that didn't fit or to take advantage of the sales?

In many ways I am ready for this anniversary day to be over. There is great value in remembering the past, healing happens and along with that the possibility of moving forward. But I've pretty much heard enough. I've read enough. I've had my heart strings pulled enough. I've been guilt-ed and saddened enough. I have been moved and impressed enough. I have even been commended and validated enough for the things I think I have thought and done right. I don't want to forget or ignore, but I think I've had enough.

Then we come to the readings for today. There are those who don't like having to use the lectionary, the lessons assigned for each Sunday. Some say they are too random and too often don't apply to the situations of the day. I can't imagine anyone saying that about the lessons assigned for today. In fact, some have been aware of these lessons falling on this day for over a year. Hmm – maybe God can work through things like lectionaries.

I have read somewhere that members of churches in Manhattan are wearing rubber-type wristbands that say – “9/11 Memorial – united by hope.” In light of today's readings I would like to change that to “United by Forgiveness.”

9/11 has been identified as a day when things changed forever for America. It is said that on 9/11 we lost our innocence and that since that day we have been living with a new normal. On that day America became a victim. That is probably all true, but I'm not ready to say it was the worst or the first or the last time that will be true. The problem with all of that, especially the victim part, is that it makes things far less clear. It's too easy for victims to use their suffering as an excuse for all kinds of decisions and actions. Being a victim can lead to justifying actions that under

other circumstances wouldn't be allowed. Many of our nation's words and policies and actions in the last 10 years have done just that. They have made real the words spoken a few days after 9/11 – words like “never again,” “whatever it takes,” we must “work the dark side” using “any means at our disposal” and “without any discussion.” Ten years later we are still dealing with the consequences of those words and that sentiment. Many of our nation's core values have been compromised. I can't claim to know enough about all of the ins and outs of some of the decisions made and actions taken, but I do know many of us have looked longingly at how Norway has handled the shooting just last month that took away Norway's innocence. Norway seems to have grieved without all of the bravado and might and fight that we have endured here, in this country.

It is true that acting as the victim is an odd thing for America. It's complicated. As a victim we are not powerless, or voiceless the way victims usually are. In fact, we are the opposite, still the most powerful military power in the world. At the same time we are unsure who the real enemy was or is and we won't know when the war is over. And when things are so undefined and uncertain it is easiest to narrow the conversation in order to sound more certain. Suddenly choices are all claimed to be between good and evil, even though at times it is not at all clear which is which.

Since 9/11, 2001 our nation has been motivated by fear and a search for security. Not without good reason. But it has created an even more divided world between “us” and “them.” This has been especially true with how we, as a nation, have understood and live with the Muslim world, both at home and around the world. We have spent our country's wealth on war and isolating those who some in our country have identified as our enemies.

The question for us, as the Church, as members of the Body of Christ, is: how do we pursue justice and love those who have been labeled our enemies?

Our readings have an answer for us. Forgiveness. Forgiveness is clearly the theme for the day. So, often in the four Gospels the parables of need explaining. But not so much this one. Forgiveness in this parable is extravagant and precious. In fact, forgiveness is extravagant to the extreme and far more precious than the wages of sin.

As Jesus answers Peter's question of how many times to forgive, he teaches that God's forgiveness is far greater than what we deserve and far greater than what we can understand. The parable is clear. Forgiveness is at the heart of our faith in God and our love for one another. Forgiveness, which we receive from God through Jesus, is exactly what God expects from us as we live with all of God's children, even those most different from us. Forgive us our sins as we have also forgiven those who have sinned against us.

This is a picture of the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom for which we pray every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, the kingdom we help to bring in through our words and deeds.

This is a tough one. Being the good Lutherans that we are, we do our best to live our lives trusting that the forgiveness we receive is free. That it's a gift. And that there really is nothing we can do or not do for the gift not be ours. Which is a good thing, because, as you know, try as we might, we are going to mess it up. We have, we do and we will. But we live trusting that forgiveness is ours, no matter what.

What makes it tough is that Jesus does not want us to just leave it at that. We are not called to simply bask in the glow of our own forgiveness, feeling the warm fuzzies of grace. We are also called to the task of forgiving others. Even those most difficult, those most different from us. Even our enemies. We are to live in forgiveness and at the same time we are to share that forgiveness in word and deed.

Sound impossible? Well, it is. If it's all left up to us. Which it is not. God's grace continues to work in us, non-stop. Whether we want it to or not. Grace upon grace.

Have you seen in pictures or on TV pictures of the 9/11 Memorial? It includes two pools that are about an acre each, which is roughly the size of each of the twin towers. The sides of the pools are 30 foot waterfalls falling into the center. It is beautiful and haunting at the same time. The water falling inward remembers the collapsing buildings and all of the tears that have fallen.

For us the water tells of something even more. Water washes clean and refreshes. Water tells of hope. But it also speaks of forgiveness. It is in the waters of Baptism that we are washed clean – forgiven of all our sins. No limits. No qualifiers. No ifs, ands or buts. Pure gift. Not because we deserve it. Or understand it. But because that is how God's grace works.

Now it is out of gratefulness that we go out and share that amazing gift. And you know what. It is going to happen here, in our midst, in just a few minutes.

First of all, there is no denying this can be a lot of work. That's why we hear and sing and speak the Word. That's why this meal is here. Another free gift from God. This is where we are fed for the tasks ahead. We are fed both in Word and Sacrament so that we have what we need to go out into the world. We have right here reminders of the forgiveness that is ours. If our ears or minds are not able to catch it, our stomachs and our souls will, whether we know it or not.

It's a lot of work. How many of you have baked or cleaned or planned for our Open House? How many of you have had to do the work of searching your soul as the barriers between Christian and Muslim come down day after day during Homework Help in our space? I ask that because if you are wondering,

now what? – how do we go out and do what Jesus said we must do – one answer is, we invite our neighbors into our home. The answer for this day is our Open House.

There are plenty of people around the world and in our city who see our neighbors as the enemy. Not so long ago one of our Luther students asked why we, Trinity, wanted to help the Somalis. He went on to say that all they really wanted to do was kill us. He came around to another viewpoint, as did the youth from Nebraska who were with us last summer and the youth from Coon Rapids who were with us this summer. But the truth still is that for many, our neighbors are seen as the bad guys, the enemy. Those to be feared and hated. Simply because of their country of origin or their faith.

The hard part of today's gospel is that even if that were to be true, which it is not, we would still be called to forgive our neighbors because we have been forgiven. Grace upon grace.

So, we invite and welcome our neighbors from around the world, even those most different from us. We share food and conversation. We live out forgiveness through our sloppy joes, coffee and bars. Through the setting up and taking down, through the washing of the dishes, through the cooking, through the mowing of the lawn, through the greeting of our neighbors, through the mingling. Even if no one were to come, we have extended the invitation and it has been seen and heard.

We live out the Prayer of the Day. Do you remember it – O Lord God, merciful judge, you are the inexhaustible fountain of forgiveness. Replace our hearts of stone with hearts that love and adore you, that we may delight in doing your will, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Bon appetit. Here and just down Riverside. Amen