

The Eighth Anniversary of 9/11
Friday September 11, 2009
Colossians 3:12-15; Matthew 18:21-35
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We have many blessings. There is much for which we can give thanks. This morning the parents and preschoolers are here for the opening of yet another very successful year of Christ Church Preschool with a current enrollment of 67 students. 40 of those households are new to our campus. We give thanks for 16 years of inviting, growing, living as we celebrate the birthday of Christ Church this weekend while hundreds raise up their ministries of servanthood by signing the banner in the worship space and sharing their stories of service over a pot luck meal. 13 newest members will be baptized into the body of Christ this weekend; those as young as a several months to two teenage boys and one adult. So, we give thanks and celebrate for how God blesses us and equips us to serve in his name.

Also on this day 9/11, we are gathered to remember one event that changed our world forever. On September 11, 2001, 19 Al Qaeda terrorists highjacked 4 commercial airliners fully intending to meet their own demise in their mission. One plane slammed into the top tier of the North Tower of the 110 story World Trade Center. A second crashed into the south tower. A third smashed right into the Pentagon. The fourth plane, intended for the United States Capital, but diverted by courageous passengers, crashed into the countryside of Pennsylvania. In the terror, 2,974 people died. 343 of those are fire fighters who so valiantly gave their lives desperately fighting to save both people and places. 60 are police officers. Still, about 2 dozen victims are unaccounted for. Yet, even in the tragedy and horror of this event, hope calls out.

At the time 39 year old Army Lt. Col. Brian Birdwell was engulfed in flames when the plane hit the Pentagon just 20 yards from where he was standing. As he dove under the sprinkler system, 60% of his body burned, fellow workers rescued him. 39 operations later, Birdwell is virtually pain free. It's been a long road to recovery. He attributes his wellness to caring friends and family, his faith and his willingness to forgive.

In our baptism God grants us the gift of forgiveness. Not just any forgiveness, but divine forgiveness. In the message from Matthew's gospel today, Peter questions Jesus about forgiveness, and asks for justification. Peter remembers the prophet Amos' ancient teaching that a person must forgive three times; but not a fourth. So, when Peter asks, "How often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?" He's willing to reach so much further with forgiveness and believes he's covered all his bases. Peter doesn't doubt that he has to forgive. He's just trying to get the rules straight. So, Jesus gives the answer, seven times 70. 490 is the magic number. Does that mean that after 490 Peter can shut the forgiveness door? Probably not, Jesus explains in the parable of the unforgiving debtor. Forgiveness has no limit.

Jesus tells the story of two debts. One, an insurmountable debt, 10 thousand talents; the equivalent of \$60 million. The debtor, full of remorse, throws himself at the feet of his master, begging for reconciliation. The compassionate master forgives the debt.

The servant is then met by a friend who owes him 100 denarii, the equivalent of \$200, a manageable sum. Grabbing the debtor by the throat, he insists that the debt be paid. No amount of repentance will grant forgiveness. The debtor is thrown into prison. The master, hearing of the servant's actions, disturbed and angered, leaves the servant to suffer the consequences of denying forgiveness.

It's a message we know all too well. If God can so lovingly and willingly sacrifice his only son on the cross to die for us, to grant us forgiveness because of his extraordinary love for us, can we not find it in our hearts to forgive all those who have wounded us? Well, yes, but, sometimes, forgiveness is easier said than done. And today, as we remember the horrors of 9/11, we may well be anxious about Jesus' call to forgiveness.

Also in our baptism, we receive this incredible gift of God's grace. God has decided that we are in his favor. In other words, we live, we're completely surrounded and immersed in the gift of God's glory, and God's love. And, it's in our baptism that we're called to live a grace filled life; we're called to respond to God within us.

Kelly Campbell decided that living in response to God's grace is worth it. Her brother in law lost his life in the Pentagon, on 9/11. She has visited Afghanistan and spends time with the innocent victims of that war torn country, trying to build relationships based on love and compassion rather than retaliation and hatred.

Our baptism calls us into a covenant with one another and with the Lord in a promise of reconciliation for what is right and good. We promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons. We strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of all people. These are bold promises we make. Because it means that we're looking for the Christ in everyone in our path, especially those whom we do not like. It means that living in a right relationship with God, we must live in a right relationship with one another. So, we agree to seek and strive. We say yes to living changed lives, but only with God's help.

Since 9/11 our world has never been the same. Children who are approaching adulthood today, reflect that they live in a world with more worry, more stress and tension. Today, on 9/11, I imagine for many of us, we still struggle to find forgiveness for those who so brutally violated our world those many 8 years ago. But, in baptism, that is exactly what we're called to do, with all good intention, to turn in our heart, souls and minds, to God and the new life God promises us in the life presented to us in the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Forgiveness does not mean we forget. Nor does it mean there are not consequences for hurtful acts. But, forgiveness does mean we're willing to be found by God's grace. Forgiveness means, we're willing to respond to the gift of the Holy Spirit surrounding us and within us to enter into new, loving relationships. We don't go back the way it was. And, the new relationship doesn't even have to be particularly close. God's grace is the

guiding light that takes us away from hatred and vengeance to places of wholeness and healing.

Often more challenging is the other side of forgiveness. We can't offer forgiveness if we're not willing to accept it; to grasp the enormous love God has for us. Does the repentant servant react with such vengeance to his fellow servant because he's unable to accept the forgiveness granted by his master; the great love of God? What still lies in his heart? What lies in the hearts of each of us?

This day, we will mourn and remember all those who lost their lives so unnecessarily because of hardened hearts. We remember all those who gave their lives in valiant efforts to rescue and save. We remember where we were on that day 8 years ago and how our hearts sank at such unbelievable horror. We remember always that God in Jesus Christ has walked this journey with us, with a tear stained face and how God, in Christ, in his love for us, calls us to forgive.

I'm not exactly sure how to move through such a huge piece of forgiveness except to say that it's going to be one step at a time. Time does heal and forgiveness grows. Lauren Manning, a happily married mother of a 10 month old baby boy was standing in the lobby of the World Trade Center when she was hit by a fire ball resulting in 80% burns over her body. Her life, for weeks, hung by a thread. Now, Greg, her husband, he's her hands. They don't live the fast paced Wall Street life they once enjoyed. They have, however, climbed the road back to healing. Life is good.

Jesus says, there's more. Love your enemies, he reminds us. Living in the freedom of forgiveness means we live loving and the result is peace. And, maybe today we're not ready to forgive the horror of 9/11. But, we can take the steps with one another. God's grace shows up in the people around us. We can choose to see grace, if we choose to live with forgiveness in our hearts. We can choose to know grace when we truly accept how much God loves us. This grace, is the peace of God which passes all understanding.