

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 10-11, 2011
Matthew 18:21-35

“How Much Is Enough?”

Today as we begin a new year of Christian education in the life of our congregation, we also call to remembrance the terrible events of September 11, 2001. Many of us vividly recall exactly where we were and what we were doing when the news was received about the airplanes crashing into the World Trade Towers in New York City. Here at home, we watched, unbelieving, as another plane crashed into the Pentagon, and then a fourth plane, diverted from its original target, crashed into an open field in Pennsylvania. 9-11 is one of those defining moments etched into the collective memory of our nation, and our world has changed dramatically in the ten years that have elapsed since then. There will be solemn observances this day as we remember those whose lives were lost, and give thanks for the many acts of heroism and compassion in the face of terrible catastrophe. Our congregation's observance of Rally Sunday, the beginning of a new year of Christian education, may seem to pale in comparison with the tenth anniversary of 9-11, but I believe there is a connection here. This connection is related to learning, which is what Rally Sunday is all about. What have we learned since that day ten years ago? We have learned that ordinary people can do extraordinary things. We have learned that the war against terrorism is on-going and continues to be waged here and overseas. We have learned that prejudice against others remains deeply rooted in the human heart. We have learned that we cannot take security and safety, here or anywhere else in the world, for granted. For us as Christian people, we have learned that even when catastrophe and disaster overtake us, our future is secure. The Lord Jesus who rose in victory over sin, death, and hell lives and reigns to all eternity, and nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39). This is most certainly true.

Looking at today's Scripture lessons, especially the Old Testament and Gospel readings, there is another learning that we need to claim for our life in Christ, and that is forgiveness. These verses from Matthew 18 focus on the forgiveness that Jesus' disciples are to manifest toward their fellow disciples who sin against them. Embedded here is Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant. Peter's question to Jesus that starts off today's Gospel reading is about putting limits on forgiveness. In short, he wants to know, "How much is enough?" That is theme for the message this day. May the Lord's rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus' sake.

Forgiveness is something that is essential in life, both in our relationship with God as well as our relationships with others. We pray for forgiveness regularly in the Lord's Prayer: "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Perhaps without even thinking about it, we invoke this petition to our Lord. In the parable from Matthew 18, Jesus warns that his heavenly Father will give to those who do not forgive the same treatment that the unmerciful servant was given. How, then, are we to live in a post-9/11 world? Specifically, how are we to live out the forgiveness Jesus calls us to live out in a post-9/11 world? Let's look at a real life example. Shortly after the 9-11 terrorist attacks, a man named Mark Stroman went on a shooting spree in the Dallas metro area. Fueled by drugs and a desire for revenge against those who perpetrated the terrorist attacks, he was on a mission to kill those who looked like Middle Eastern. He even called himself the "Arab Slayer," killing two people and seriously injuring a third. The lone survivor of his shooting rampage was a Muslim immigrant from

Bangladesh, Rais Bhuiyan, who was a convenience store worker. He was shot in the face at close range, and blinded in one eye. In the ten years since then, Mr. Bhuiyan took on the surprising role of chief supporter and advocate to save the life of the man who tried to kill him. As Mr. Bhuiyan stated: "I'm trying to do my best not to allow the loss of another human life. I'll knock on every door possible" (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/43241014>). He has worked systematically through legal and political channels to save the life of Mark Stroman, a death row inmate.. What is unique and unprecedented here is that this is the first time that in the state of Texas a victim has become the advocate for clemency for his perpetrator. Despite Rais Bhuiyan's extraordinary efforts to save the life of the one who tried to kill him, Mark Stroman was executed this past summer on July 20 (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/20/mark-stroman-executed_n_905292.html). I do not know exactly what moved this individual to pursue the path of forgiveness that he chose, but I do know that the forgiveness that Rais Bhuiyan showed for Mark Stroman points us to what Jesus calls us to do: forgive others as we ourselves have been forgiven.

But how much is enough when it comes to forgiveness? That was Peter's question, and it is our question today. By nature, we human beings are prone to keep score in life – in our relationships, what others owe to us, what we owe to others. By nature, when struck, we strike back. Vengeance and the desire for retaliation run very deep within us. It is not so with God, nor is it be so with his people. To forgive runs counter to what our fallen human nature urges us to do. The truth is that the ability to forgive does not come from us, but from the One who has already forgiven us – not because we have earned or deserved this, but because as the psalmist writes: **"He [God] does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities"** (Psalm 103:10). And nowhere is this gracious forgiveness more clearly seen than at the cross. It is here, at the cross, that Jesus, true God and true Man, took upon himself all of our sins – all of our vengeance and retaliation, all of our score-keeping and questioning, "How much is enough?". He took upon himself that overwhelming, massive debt that we could never hope to pay in a thousand lifetimes - the evil we have done and the good we have failed to do. He himself bore this crushing burden on the cross for each one of us. Like that king in the parable, **"... out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt"** (Matthew 18:27). We are that man! And now what is our response? Being set free and released from the debt, do we then turn on our fellow servants and withhold the same forgiveness that we ourselves have received? God forbid! We must, for Jesus' sake, forgive as we have been forgiven. It is Jesus himself who will give us the strength, courage, and peace to do this – not seven times, not seventy times seven, not asking "How much is enough?", but as God in Jesus forgives us – without limit. God help us to do this for Jesus' sake. Amen.