

Proper 19 Year A 2011

“Forgive not seven times but I tell you seventy seven times”

My first day of class at seminary was exactly ten years ago, September 11 2001. (an omen one way or another I thought about becoming a priest) I remember like all of you do, all of who are old enough to remember..... I remember exactly where I was when the first jet crashed into the World Trade Tower. I was on top of a rise headed into Austin at this very hour (8:00 a.m.) and on that rise one could see the sparkling panorama of the beautiful Austin skyline that gently slopes from the north to south down to the Colorado River. (In Texas they say that’s the real Colorado River...well, what do you expect from Texans) I was listening to NPR and Carl Cassels gave the first confusing news that it appeared that a “commuter plane” had struck the World Trade Center.....by the time I reached the seminary a second plane, a Boeing 757 jet, had struck the other tower....and we all then knew what had happened....We were sitting in the lecture hall and learned that there were at least two more jets unaccounted for....and I remember feeling genuinely afraid.... A Lutheran student whose parents lived in Manhattan burst into the room, her cell phone to her ear, and said that one of the towers had collapsed....I didn’t believe her.....someone wheeled a T.V. set in and we watched the horror unfold.....the horrible truth that is terror... All of you can tell this story.

And though there were countless acts of heroism, countless acts of sacrifice, countless acts of love even unto this very day stemming from the despicable acts of 9/11....actions that we honor and hold sacred; and we grieve to this day the loss of life of the victims of this tragedy, and we mourn with those who survived them.... But the sad fact of the matter is that the terrorist strike worked....Our government reacted out of fear, and allowed that fear to fester in the culture to support a policy of vengeance....a policy meant to prove our superiority of strength and dominance, as if proof were needed....Our government of course isn’t alone in that....empire after empire in the world’s history, the history of patriarchy, have without exception acted violently when threatened by a perceived enemy....Our politicians acted the way leaders of empire act.

We of course have the luxury of hindsight now....We have fought, and are still fighting the two longest wars in our country’s history....we have spent almost one and a half trillion dollars fighting them, a substantial portion embezzled we are told by several news sources... We now as a nation have the greatest debt in our history....a one and a half trillion dollar

military enterprise over ten years will do that!...thousands of military personnel have lost their lives, many more sorely wounded...thousands more of innocent civilians have been killed or wounded as well, “collateral damage” we have coined that...the use of torture exposed...secret prisons... on and on....and at best....to be charitable, the results of these huge projects, no matter how it is spun...the best we can say is that the results are ambiguous...there is no closure...no so-called victory....Iraq is already experiencing a resurgence of violence, which will increasingly become sectarian...Afghanistan is an unsolvable puzzle with its opium trade among the warlords and the Taliban, and its fragile government....and all this expense and all the lives and all the broken hearts, all of this grand enterprise, occupying two entire countries, to round up a small band of extremist criminals.

Now I’m not trying to rain on the Sept. 11 parade, or perhaps I am....I mean sincerely that I admire and honor our military men and women...I admire their single hearted dedication, their professionalism... and I love this country....but good people....good citizens of God’s commonweal and citizens of America, today also must be a day of lament....that’s a word absent in all the news coverage, a word we never utter as a culture.... But lament we must the violence and havoc we have caused and the grief and pain we have inflicted...and above all as the world grows smaller, we as a leader of nations must find another way, a better way, a humane way, a high road to deal with conflict and the evil that is in our world.

I think today’s Gospel reading speaks to that.... This the familiar parable of the master writing off the overwhelming debt of one of his slaves...and then that same slave refusing to write off the debt of another slave who owed him...and we read that when the master/king hears of such hypocrisy he withdraws his forgiveness from the slave he had just pardoned... the obvious, perhaps too obvious punch line being that if one doesn’t forgive as the master forgives (the master who represents God according to many interpreters)... if one doesn’t forgive as God forgives then one will not be forgiven as well. But as parables are wont to be, they are multilayered and slippery. We know through our own experience, and are being reminded here that not being forgiven is a burden...and we also know that to withhold forgiveness is a burden as well; that point is made on the surface in this parable....we know the truth of that all too well in our families....some families are torn apart for the lack of forgiveness....but there is a deeper level to this parable...a teaching on a grander scale as to the way God would have us live as a community, as God’s people, as citizens of God’s gracious commonweal.

The Greek word in this text that we translate “forgiveness” literally means to “unbind.” That’s important for us to know...and you have heard me say before that the principal concept of sin in the ancient world is structural, not individual but sin embedded in the order of society....sin, not so much about the individual, but sin the unjust structures of society that would abase and oppress and wound....that’s important for us to know as well....this concept of sin got resurrected among the liberation theologians of the twentieth century....so I would argue that the deeper layer of this parable is teaching us that as a community of the faithful we are to “forgive sin”....that is to say, we are to unbind those who because of unjust structures of our world are disenfranchised and live without dignity....What tips us off as to this parable being principally about a people and not the individual is this: A talent is roughly equal to 9 kilograms of silver...so ten thousand talents, of which the master pardons the slave, would be an unimaginable sum of money...an amount no individual, not even the wealthiest of the wealthy could possess, much less owe....some scholars write this off as Jesus exaggerating to make the point that God abundantly forgives....but later in the parable God reneges on God’s forgiveness, which would be counter to Jesus’ admonition to forgive seventy times....What many interpreters miss here is the key point...ten thousand talents is the legendary amount of conscription that the Romans levied on the state of Judah and Galilee in 60 B.C.E. when the Romans occupied Palestine....So any Jew worth his or her salt upon hearing the reference to the ten thousand talents would think Empire, occupying empire...the king in this story is not God but occupying empire...forgiving the lowly prostrate servant Israel...and then upon Israel’s own malfeasance(and I think Matthew is pointing a finger at the malfeasance of the Jewish leadership of his day) the king then taking that forgiveness back, and punishing as only an empire can punish....by torture until the unrepayable debt is repaid, an impossibility, a living hell... Brothers and sisters, that is not the way God is....God lavishes forgiveness upon us...God is in the business of unbinding....God is in the business of freedom...God is in the business of setting the captive free.... to forgive conditionally and unforgive....that is the way of empire...oppressive patriarchy.

Matthew here in the words of Jesus is the prophet preaching to his people that we are not to act as empire acts.... we are to forgive....we are to unbind....we are to set free....and if we fail to do so then the consequences are polarizing, isolating....they become unbearable, tortuous, as the community becomes fractured....It is true in our families and among our business partners and among our friends that we are to set each other free

from that which binds us...set each other free from whatever it is that fractures us....to restore the human circle as it were....and then on the macrocosmic scale we are to do the same....we are to forgive, our singular vocation....we are to unbind our fellow citizens in this earth, all of God's beloved from whatever burdens them...

In our school systems...in our healthcare system...in our prisons across this country, in which by the way we spend fifteen times more than what we spend on education...in business and in industry and government... in our common life together we are being challenged by this gospel to unbind those who are burdened and heavy laden...we are challenged to forgive, to unbind all who have lost their personhood because of injustice and degradation....we are to restore the creation to its wholeness through forgiveness...through the act of setting free the bound ones of our world....and brothers and sisters violence won't do it....In fact, of all the degrading burdens in our world, violence is the worst.

The metaphor in our reading today about debt forgiveness would also make this parable chiefly about community...because in ancient Jewish culture debts were forgiven every seven years, the jubilee year....the family, the nation set free from their burdens so that the circle of life giving humanity, life giving community might be restored....It is as if the human community is one organism to God...and when one part suffers so does the rest of the body.

Our role as people of faith and I pray that our role as the most powerful nation in the world is to take on the single hearted vocation of being about the world's restoration...restoring the world to the circle of mutual friendship that we are meant to be...the dream God dreams for us, all of us, and we bearers of that dream...and here we are told the means, if we have ears to hear...the means is *forgiveness*...the vocation of bearing freedom of personhood to the broken of our world....and not just seven times... but seventy times....we are to live our lives only to set free our neighbor from that which binds them...and that means a joyful freedom for us as well... a freedom that is the hallmark of the community of God building heaven in earth,; forgiveness the means of building heaven in earth, a sparkling city of resplendent well being....It is the coming of the humane that engenders in our world the divine....so it is high time now after history books full of wars, and wars and more wars and injustice and dispossession... it is time to unbind them not just seven times but as many as seventy times sevenIt is high time to unbind them, unbind them all... and set them free.