

A Sermon by the Rev. Canon Patricia Daniel-Turk on the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 11, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

The Arithmetic of Forgiveness

Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. —Matthew: 18:21-22

This past week, Jim, son Rob and I packed up all the belongings and memories accumulated over 18 years of life in Jacksonville, Florida; Our new destinations?.....Beaufort for Jim and me and Columbia, for Rob. I was assigned the task of packing up family photos. I came across one that was very poignant for this Sunday, the 10th anniversary of 9/11. Rob was 6 years old when we visited the "Big Apple" on our annual family vacation. The photo was taken on the ferry crossing over to Ellis Island. Rob is standing in the middle with Jim and me on either side of him. At first glance, I was focused on what a nice family portrait it was and what a great time we had exploring the city that never sleeps and the city where it is said ..."if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere. Then I noticed the background of the picture was the southern tip of Manhattan with the two World Trade Center towers prominent on the skyline. It brought back memories of that fateful day in 2001, when not only the skyline of New York was changed forever but also each of us, the peoples of our nation and the peoples of the world...and I wondered, where do I even begin in putting a homily together for the 10th anniversary of the horrific events that unfolded on that fateful day, September 11, 2001?

Frank Logue, Canon to the Ordinary for the Diocese of Georgia offers the perfect beginning for today...He starts by making the following statement:

"You have to be taught to hate. Little boys do not stitch together their own Klansman robes. Young girls do not look longingly at vests in shop windows with visions of being a suicide bomber. Yes, children will readily turn sticks into swords and guns for their play. But they do not name someone as 'other,' the enemy, an object of hate. You have to be taught to name the ones to be feared and fought as 'the Russians,' the 'Vietnamese,' the Iraqis. And while the color of someone's skin does not readily carry values, children can learn to hate based on the differing tones as easily as they can be taught to hate a group of people for the beliefs they hold."

Talk about cutting to the heart of the matter in finding a place to begin today, Frank does just that. Hate was indeed the root cause of the events of 911. Hatred can be learned at any age. Teens with no hope of a future, even grown men and women can channel their frustrations and fear into hatred.

How far hatred can carry the human heart was made crushingly clear 10 years ago at 8:46 a.m., Eastern Daylight Time. American Airlines Flight 11 from Boston was bound for Los Angeles when it was hijacked 15 minutes into the flight. Loaded with fuel for the cross country trip, the plane became a guided missile, slamming 91 people into the North Tower of the World Trade

Center. Within minutes, the media was going live with news of a terrible accident in New York as firefighters and policemen rushed through Manhattan commuter traffic toward the shredded remains of the upper floors of the tower. Seventeen minutes later a second airliner disappeared into the South Tower. After this it became very clear that no accident had occurred, America was under attack.

If these two events weren't tragic enough, the news reported a plane crashing into the Pentagon and another into a field in Pennsylvania. The Twin Towers fell. Before all was said and done, the 19 hijackers had killed 2,973 people and sent out waves of grief and panic around the world.

It is indeed fair and true to say that the hijackers had been fed a steady diet of hate. They were consumed by that hate and fed a desire to lash out against the United States in an act of terror more important than their own lives.

Not only did the carnage of that morning gouge out a deep hole where the World Trade Center once stood, but it also left a deep wound in the psyche of the United States. Ten years later, the wound has not completely healed. We retaliated first against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and then against Saddam Hussein and those who supported him in Iraq. Seal Team Six just recently took out Osama Ben Laden, the man behind the terror. Yet none of these actions has brought healing. The surface is scarred over. The pain and the horror remain.

In the Gospel reading appointed for this Sunday (Matthew 18:21-35), Peter comes to Jesus with a question and one that is appropriate on this 10th anniversary of 911. The question has to do with how many times does one need to forgive their enemies. Peter wonders if seven times is enough. Jesus responds that one is to forgive one's enemies not just 7 times but 77 times—some scholars say this should have been translated as 70 times 70 or 4900 times. Jesus uses the extreme in responding to Peter, along with the parable that follows, in order to get the following point across...God has forgiven each of us so much that we are called to go out and forgive others. But in light of the atrocities and loss of life brought about on 911, aren't some acts too great to forgive? Aren't we let off the hook when it comes to the atrocities brought about on 911? And this one day does not stand alone. World history is packed to the brim with similar acts of evil. Even within living memory, many of us have seen the killing fields of Cambodia, the wholesale slaughter of Stalin's iron fisted reign in Russia, the effects of the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda. We have learned that once we have been taught to demonize those we hate, then any act can be justified.

Looking at the sum total of all these acts of extreme violence, we must ask, "Are there not some crimes too heinous to forgive? And on this day, we ask, "Isn't forgiving the perpetrators of 911 too much to ask? How could those of us who remain alive even have the right to forgive?"

The answer from scripture is two-fold. First scripture teaches that judgment is for God alone. Second, we are to forgive as we have been forgiven. In the reading from Romans (Romans 14:1-12), Paul says, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God." We are,

each of us accountable, on a daily basis, for actions before God. We are not accountable for the injury done to us, but for our reactions to that hurt.

Jesus who taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," called out from the cross, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." Yet forgiveness can be so difficult. Not forgiving someone is like drinking poison in the hope that the other person will die. Archbishop Desmond Tutu knows about forgiveness through the daring act of helping lead South Africa through truth and reconciliation after the end of Apartheid. This involved thousands of acts of confession and forgiveness. He has written of this process saying:

"Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. It means taking what happened seriously and not minimizing it; drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our entire existence. It involves trying to understand the perpetrators and so have empathy, to try and stand in their shoes and appreciate the sort of pressures and influences that might have conditioned them."

Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, and reconciliation is not always possible. Forgiveness means trusting judgment to God, and this is only possible by the grace that comes from God alone. Archbishop Tutu writes, "Forgiving means abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin, but it is a loss that liberates the victim."

God revealed self to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He lived among us, not just teaching about the way of love, but more importantly, showing us the love of God. Jesus continually gave the example of offering mercy, love and forgiveness. In so doing, he revealed a pattern for how we too may turn and do likewise. We have to learn grace and forgiveness. Children do not learn to forgive unless they are shown by example. We as adults do not learn to forgive unless we practice and become the examples for our children and for one another. They and we need to practice day in and day out the cross of the life of Jesus Christ, the love to be at mercy and to forgive.

Amen.