

The 13th Sunday after Pentecost, September 11, 2011



**Forgive and Forget?
NO!**

Remember ... and Forgive.

a sermon by the Rev. Warren L. Pittman

texts: Exodus 14:19-31; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

“Remember.”

It’s a word I’ve been hearing a lot this past week: a word I imagine we’ve all been hearing for a while, as the decennial of “Nine-Eleven” has been approaching.

Newspaper articles, radio features, and television specials have been offered to help us “Remember” what happened ten years ago today in rural Pennsylvania, at the Pentagon, and New York City.

Not that we’ve needed all that much help. Although the plane crashes near Shanksville and in Arlington were tragedies in and of themselves, for most of us, the memory is a vivid visual one of the Twin Towers smoking, burning, and falling into the dust that blanketed lower Manhattan that day.

Like the white imprint left on our retinas when a camera flash goes off, the image of that day stays with us who stood or sat watching, either in person, or on televisions around the world.

How can we not “Remember”?

It is a hard memory. I know a number of people who still cannot watch the video tapes, and it’s not the sort of historical event with which I dreamed the twenty-first century would begin

And yet the past ten years, and the care-full planning that has gone into many of the programs and activities that are a part of this week-end commemoration, have helped, in some small way, to lessen the intensity of the image.

This weekend we remember the events and the many, many people whose lives were lost that day; along with that, we remember the many who *gave* their lives that day. This weekend we are asked to remember and honor the “first responders,” the police, firefighters, rescue workers and volunteers who served that day and in the days and weeks that followed, and to honor them by offering ourselves in service to others.



Our shock, sorrow, and grief is complemented by gratitude: gratitude for the service others offer to us, and the service we can offer to others. The tolling of bells and moments of stillness and silence are complemented by the sound of hammers building and repairing homes for those in need of shelter, servers in soup kitchens, volunteers sorting groceries for food banks, and the sound of people reaching out to one another.

But today, as we gather to worship as part of our “remembrance,” and as we listen to God’s Word, another image comes into my imagination: an image that is as hard, and perhaps harder, to look at than the Towers.

Through the night of November 14, 1940, 515 German bombers flew over the city of Coventry, England, dropping bomb after bomb. The city was a military target, with factories and industries crucial for British defense, but in 1940, there were no “smart bombs” or computer-controlled drones, only pilots and bombardiers whose strategy was to blanket an area with everything they could in the way of high explosives and incendiary bombs.

Factories were hit, along with 4,000 homes; as many as 60,000 buildings were seriously damaged, and the great 15th century cathedral church of Saint Michael the Archangel, was burned to a charred shell.

Today, if you pass through Coventry, you can see the new St. Michael’s Cathedral, not rebuilt on the foundations of the old, but next to them. The burned shell still remains – a way of asking its visitors to “remember.” There is an altar at the east end of the ruins, and over it stands a cross, made soon after the bombing, as I recall, from two fallen roof beams.

But it is what the people of Coventry Cathedral decided to carve on the wall behind the Holy Table and cross that I see this morning, with the Gospel’s words still echoing in my ears.

Two words ... just two words: “Father forgive.”

Taken on a Sunday that comes in what we call “Ordinary Time,” Jesus’ response to Peter’s question about forgiveness is challenging.

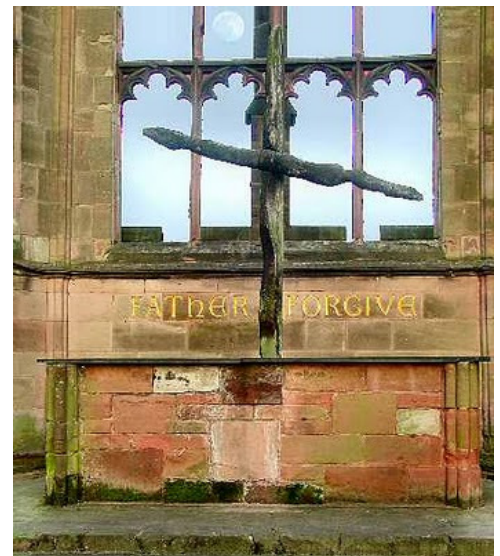
"Lord, ... how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Some translations read “*seventy times seven*,” and a part of me imagines Jesus setting the bar even higher. What’s the Aramaic way, I wonder, of saying “Seven-tillion”?

Jesus says, “forgive, and forgive, and forgive...” with no qualifications. There are no exceptions to that rule, no exclusions, no listing of “that which is *not* to be forgiven.”

Each day we ask Our Father to “*forgive us our sins, our trespasses, as we forgive ...*” Most days I can say “Amen” to that, but this “extra-Ordinary” day of 9/11/2011, with those words from the cathedral wall in my mind and Jesus’ words to Peter in my ears, as I “remember” ten years ago today, I wonder, “How?”



How do I forgive? How do we forgive? How do we move through the pain, beyond the anger, to forgiveness?

Jesus does not tell Peter how to forgive. Would that there were a twelve-step program, an operations manual, a "Forgiveness for Dummies" book that clearly showed us how to forgive "those who sin, who trespass, against us." But there is not, and even if there were, on an occasion like this, were I among those whose lives were directly impacted by the events of ten years ago, I don't know if I could find it in my heart to forgive.

"Father, forgive ..." The two words are Jesus' words, his prayer from the cross on that day in which the world attacked him, lifted him up and brought him down. If anything was unforgiveable, it was Jesus' death, carried out in the Name of God and in the name of peace and justice, and yet, he forgave.

When I cannot find it in *my* heart to forgive, I see that it is in *God's* heart to forgive; and then I see how the heart and the Holy Spirit of God so willingly share that forgiveness with those who ask for it.

We listened the "baptismal" story of the Hebrews – at least that's what Saint Paul called it. The Red Sea parts and lets Moses lead the newly liberated slaves out of Egypt. When Pharaoh's war machine tries to follow, the waters consume them. A few verses after what we heard today one can read the lyrics of a Hebrew victory song. But it was not long afterwards that rabbis, knowing what they had come to know of God's heart, added a *midrash*, a parenthetical comment to the story, telling how God stopped the song and dance there on the far side of the Red Sea, calling the Hebrews to remember that "the Egyptians are my children, too."

Paul writes to the Church in Rome about the forgiveness and reconciliation that community life requires.

And since the time of Jesus, the miracle of God's forgiveness has been a part of human history: in that same war in which St. Michael's was destroyed, people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Anne Frank, and Etty Hillesum *were* able to forgive.

Gandhi forgave not only his oppressors, but his assassin.

In South Africa the voice of Nelson Mandela called the deeply divided people of that nation to forgive, and Bishop Desmond Tutu reminds us all that *There is No Future Without Forgiveness*. Without it we are as imprisoned as the slave in Jesus' parable.

In Sierra Leone, we have listened to people who were victimized, terrorized, and tortured by rebels tell us stories about how they are helping the same rebels return from their insanity; in Rwanda and the Congo, similar stories can be heard.

I'm not sure how to forgive, but I know that forgiveness is possible, and I know from whom it comes.

Let me close with the lyrics of a song about forgiveness, lyrics that tell a story by which I am encouraged, and given hope:

1000 Candles, 1000 Cranes

*My grandmother had three sons
She dreamed about her children's children
Then came 1941
Only one son would see the war end*

*In Illinois, far from her past
Miss Nakamura still remembers
She was six when she saw the flash
That turned the world to smoke and ashes*

*Joseph died marching in Bataan
Frank on the sands of Iwo Jima
The day the bomb destroyed Japan
She thanked God and Harry Truman*

*Mother taught her daughter well
Run from the fire to the river
There she found a living hell
But not a mother or a father*

*She blamed the "godless Japanese"
For having crushed her sweetest dreams
One thousand candles for my sons
Every day I will remember*

*Though she survived with just a scrape
Her family vanished into space
One thousand suns, a thousand cranes
Everyday I will remember*

*My grandmother had three sons
She never dreamed she'd have a daughter
But at the age of eighty-one
She met a nurse named Nakamura*

*It was a question only meant
To make some talk and pass the hours
About a picture by the bed
A photograph of two young soldiers*

*Hatred and anger stored for years
Slowly melted into tears
One thousand candles, a thousand cranes
Everyday I will remember*

*I've a picture in my mind
Of two women slowly walking
August 6th, 1985
Walking to church to light a candle*

*And they once asked me to explain
Why grown men play such foolish games
One thousand candles, a thousand cranes
Everyday I will remember.*