

The Hope of the World

Today is a day for remembering. It is hard to believe that ten years have passed since that bright September morning when we witnessed planes used as missiles, saw the destruction in New York and Virginia and learned of the heroism in the sky over Pennsylvania. Ten years. It seems both just yesterday and a lifetime past. Today is a day for remembering.

How do we think about remembering? Just as it was for the ancient Israelites and for 1st century Christians, scripture is our first resource. Like the ancient Israelites and like 1st century Christians, we are called to remember. Like them, and with our Jewish sisters and brothers today, we remember being "a slave in the land of Egypt, and (that) the LORD (our) God brought (us) out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deut. 5:15). With the Psalmist, we "call to mind the deeds of the LORD...remember his wonders of old." (Ps 77:11) We remember the instructions of our Lord to pray using his words, "Our Father..." And every Sunday we "remember his death, proclaim his resurrection, and await his coming in glory."

We are not alone in remembering. God remembers. God "remembers his covenant, and shows compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love." (Ps 106:45) God remembers not from a desire to punish, but from a desire to restore. God remembers in order to forgive since without remembrance forgiveness is meaningless. Isaiah tells us that because of his steadfast love, God "(does) not remember our sins." (Is. 44:25) It is to this 'un-remembering' of God that today's Gospel speaks.

Jesus and his disciples have been talking about community. He gathered a small group of disciples, students, who walked along the dusty roads with him, ate with him in homes along the way or dined outside on bread and fish. With him they sailed back and forth across the Sea of Galilee. They, like people everywhere, usually got along but sometimes, as happens in the happiest communities, the closest families, there was strife and discord.

Last week we heard Jesus' remedy for those times. He told his disciples, "Don't complain to everyone except the one causing the trouble but instead talk with that person directly and if they can't or won't hear you, bring others along to help you say what needs to be said."

Today Peter comes back to Jesus with a follow up question, "How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Peter didn't just pick the number seven out of thin air. Seven is the number of completeness, of fullness, of totality. For Peter, to forgive seven times is humanly impossible. To Peter's question, Jesus answers, "No, not seven times [Peter probably breathed a sign of relief], not seven but **seventy-seven times.**" Peter is told to forgive utterly, to forgive without holding back, to be as forgiving as God.

How is this possible? With Peter and the other disciples, we say, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" (John 6:60) We want to chalk up the teaching and the following parable to exaggeration for effect – like Jesus' camels going through needles' eyes or his instructions to pluck out our own offending eyes. We want him to be indulging in hyperbole.

Surely Jesus does not expect us to let go of our memories of grievances, our justifiable anger and forgive repeatedly, over and over and over. Surely he doesn't expect us to forgive those who repeatedly offend, who have continued to do over and over and over the very things that caused us anguish in the first place. But he does. He expects this of us, his church. He expects us to be, as Bishop Rabb said, "a living breathing community of hope, mercy and forgiveness." He truly expects we will live into what being made in the image of God entails. He truly expects us to love – God, neighbor, and enemy. He truly expects us to be perfect as God is perfect. (Mt 5:8) And to be perfect is to be forgiving.

In all the remembering of the sojourn in Egypt, of the exile in Babylon, nowhere is there an instruction to remember for all time the Egyptians as slave masters or the Babylonians as conquerors. Instead, "Remember that I brought you out", says God. We are to remember God and begin a new life. In all our remembering of Jesus' death at the hands of Rome and the powers that be in Jerusalem, nowhere is there an instruction to remember for all time the Romans as murderers and the Sanhedrin as accomplices. Instead, we are to remember his death, proclaim his resurrection and await his coming. As we wait, we are to remember and live into the new life Jesus has brought to the world. We are to remember without anger, without thoughts of retribution or revenge.

How easy it is to talk about remembering and how hard it is to live forgivingly. "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" Intellectually I know I will be a better person if I practice or begin to practice forgiveness, begin to see that Annie Lamont's words are true, that "the villain has a heart and the hero has great flaws," (*Bird by Bird*) but it is emotionally much

more satisfactory to remember unforgivingly everything from the smallest slight to the greatest wrong. It is much more satisfactory to remember unforgivingly when I know I am right by any culture's or religion's standard of ethics or morality. It is much more satisfactory to hold on to thoughts of revenge and dashing heads against rocks (Ps 137:9), to plan, even if only in my own vivid imagination, how get back at and how to get even. But does it help me at all, remembering this way?

Jesus, that close observer of the human condition says, "Madeleine, Madeleine, it doesn't help you. It's a good thing I am with you and that you are part of my community, my church, so you can practice remembering with forgiveness."

Now the question is: Are we to be forgiving only within Jesus' community, only within the church? Is Jesus confining his forgiveness seventy-seven times to within the church community? Or is forgiveness part of the loving – loving God, loving neighbor, and, yes, loving enemy – that Jesus says is the essence of discipleship? Yes, it is. And forgiving is both for the individual, Peter is to be utterly forgiving, and for the church, together we are to be utterly forgiving. Our failures to forgive are failures to, as the parable puts it, pass on the forgiveness that God has already granted us.

Now, forgiving is not forgetting. Forgiving is not the obliteration of wrongdoing. Forgiving does not turn wrong into right or give us happy amnesia. Forgiving is not something we do for others. Forgiving is something God does for us and enables us to do for ourselves. Forgiveness, God's of us and ours of neighbor or enemy, is redemptive because, as Desmond

Tutu once said, "Without forgiveness there can be no future for a relationship between individuals or within and between nations." (From "Truth and reconciliation", BBC *Focus on Africa* magazine) There is no future for us individually or collectively when we remain mired in the past, remembering old wrongs, old hurts. When we forgive we let go – let go of negativity, let go of the desire for revenge, let go of the need to strike back, let go of the past so we can live in the present and prepare for the future.

Paul wrote, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." (Phil 2:5) We, his church, are his mind. We, his church, are his pattern, his template for a new life, a new way of being – we are his template for the future. We, his church, are to show our sad and broken world that we can and everyone can pass on the forgiveness God has granted all his children. We, his church, are his "living breathing community of hope, mercy and forgiveness." And because we are his community, we are the hope of the world.