

Choose life. Choose to forgive.

Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector, at the eleven o'clock service, September 11, 2011, The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost. Based on Matthew 18:21-35.

For many years, I've been hearing well-meaning people say to suffering or bereaved people, "Remember, God does not put any burden on us greater than we can carry." I heard a well-meaning person say it just two days ago. Truth to tell, I've said it a few times myself.

But I made a decision some years before 9/11 to not use that phrase because, upon reflection, I did not believe it. In the days after 9/11, I reaffirmed that decision.

That decision helped keep me straight about my faith and my practice of that faith. It helps me remember why we come here today: to worship God, not patronize God. We say with our lives, if not always with our lips: God, this is a terrible burden or loss and sorrow and shock that has been laid on us. But that will not stop us from doing what we must do: to remember and pray for the beloved dead.

And because they died on a day that will live in infamy, September 11, 2001, we come not as well-meaning people, but as people who have been through a lot, people who have learned to lean on one another for strength. We come not to deny that there is a burden that is greater than we can bear, but to help one another bear it.

For some the need to remember is essential. When you've lost a husband or wife, a son, a daughter, father or mother, every day is a reminder of what you've lost. On this day, let us say from deep in our souls, may they rest in peace. May those who died for bravery and selflessness be remembered and thanked for as long as we can say or pray or sing. Thank you. Peace to you.

For others, it is the terror and meaning of that awful day that is the memory. That memory we want to help one another unload. So vivid, even ten years later: the people we lost, the way of life we lost, the costs of living in a borderless world with no perfect security. And for Americans of all origins, and colors and faiths, a new pain, realized daily, is that we—simply because of who we are, and where we live—are distrusted, even hated by others.

The prayer that you will hear in music and often wordlessly in our hearts today is something that we can realize only by being together, working together. Prayer is not magic. Prayer is a form of solidarity, a form of love and caring. Let our prayer be, if nothing else, that we help carry the burdens that are too great to bear. Burdens that, yes, are greater than the strength God is giving us.

And one way to do that is to remember the living, to show them extra love. Another thing, unavoidably, even when our energies flag, is that we can and must work to understand what real security now means. And we have to keep working for the kind of justice that will sap the anger of those whose sense of injustice seems to rest on an extreme need to be right, to have the only way to God.

That itself is burdensome work, because the extremists for God are on our side, too. Let us be clear about that.

But the awful burden that exceeds our strength can be lightened by doing something that is hard to understand, hard to do, something completely surprising and counterintuitive.

We can forgive.

Because we are church people, we bow often and in some interesting ways to tradition. Tradition means among other things that we do not make up our faith and practice as we go along. We inherit it. We read it in what has been saved for us to read. Today, most Christians in the world are gathering to hear the hard, surprising, and counterintuitive words of Jesus.

Asked once if he really meant one should forgive those who sin against us, more particularly if we should forgive seven times, as some tradition then held, Jesus said not seven but seventy-seven times. That's a way of saying that if you're counting, you're

probably not forgiving.

Then he told a parable contrasting the fate of a rich man's chief of staff or household manager who had gotten into a lot of debt. Reduced to abject begging, the man threw himself on the master's mercy, and the master forgave the huge debt, sparing the man and his family being sold into slavery and put in prison. When the same crew chief turned around and demanded payment of a rather routine small debt from one of his staff, he had the guy thrown into jail. When the rich man heard, he reversed his mercy and the crew chief ended up in long-term debtor's prison.

Jesus did not write books or systems of rules. He told stories. He told stories to force the point. He wanted everyone who heard that story the first time to do what we are asked to do as we hear it the umpteenth time today, which is choose. Who do you want to be? Who do you want to be like? The guy who threw caution to the wind and ate all that money and forgave his staff member? Or, the guy who had not a shred of mercy in his heart?

Jesus was no moralist, no systematic theologian—he was a challenger. He believed however crushing are the burdens of this life, God wants us to choose life—to choose all of its possibilities—to do the surprising and counterintuitive work that that demands. That's what forgiveness is.

That means loving our enemies and forgiving God when life doesn't turn out the way we want it to, does not play out according to the script that we've all written.

Jesus doesn't want bible studies to meet all over the country to parse this parable. He simply wants us to choose. What kind of person do you want to be? One who listens to others and to your own life and forgives, or one who demands that everybody be right and be paid up always?

Above all, be very, very skeptical if someone tells you that what Jesus means by Forgiveness is to forgive Mohammed Atta and the eighteen terrorist colleagues of his who did that deed ten years ago today. No, that is not forgiveness. Forgiveness is about you and me, it's about us, about who we are to be.

Forgiveness is about what we think about God. We need to forgive is the pattern of facts that becomes real life: Life as we know it can be glorious and free, but not without the ultimate freedom that God has built into it which means that things happen to the innocent, to the good and even to the clueless. And it all hurts. And it's sometimes a burden greater than we can bear.

One definition of forgiveness has emerged in the ongoing studies of the Forgiveness Project at Stanford University's Center for Research in Disease Prevention. Real people with real grievances, testify that forgiveness is that quality of "peace and understanding that comes from blaming that which has hurt you less, taking the life experience less personally, and changing your grievance story."

In other words, choose life. Choose to live for our children, for the possibilities of what we can build in our community. Choose because we love one another. A significant number of those in the study project say, Finally, I get it. I don't have to rent so much space in my head and my heart for those who hurt me. I will claim that space for my life. It's as close to the voice of Jesus that you're going to hear coming out of Stanford University.

I believe that Jesus practiced forgiveness and taught forgiveness as a way of moving beyond the rules that we demand others follow, as a way of not focusing on our own wounded feelings all the time, as a way of diminishing the power over you of those who have caused you pain and loss.

Forgiveness is not about reconciliation. That's something else—important, certainly, and hard work. Forgiveness is not about condoning evil. It's not living in denial about those burdens we carry. Forgiveness is simply the choice to live.

9/11 cruelly and unjustly robbed us of a lot, but it did not rob us of that choice. 9/11 put crushing burdens on some of you greater than the rest of us, but it did not take away the hope of those who live on. In our prayers and our songs and our tears today, let's choose that hope and live the life we have.

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