

Forgiveness after 25 Years
The Rev. Amy Spagna
September 13, 2026 – Pentecost 16A
Matthew 18:21-35

This week marks the 25th anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Even after all this time, the memories, the trauma, and the pain of those whose loved ones were killed at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the crash site of United Flight 93 in rural Pennsylvania are nearly still as fresh as they were in the immediate aftermath. My own memories of that day are largely of being a teacher at a high school which was 9 miles due south of the Pentagon. We spent most of the day with the same class, thanks to the building being put on what amounted to a loose lockdown so we knew where students and teachers alike were actually located. We all knew someone who worked in that building, but we didn't know much else. The only computer in the classroom was a behemoth sitting on the teacher's desk. It was of limited use; the internet connection was painfully slow thanks to all of the traffic flooding to news websites as people all over the world tried to watch what was happening. By lunchtime, my students had had enough of watching the news. They wisely changed the channel on the big tube TV in the corner of the room to some really bad movie on one of the few channels we had available other than the news.

In the immediate aftermath, most of what I remember was the collective sense of outrage that this had happened; fear over what might be coming next; and just how eerily quiet it was. There wasn't any of the usual traffic noise, from the ground or the air. For the next several days, most of what we heard came from the fighter planes circling overhead, patrolling the now-restricted airspace over DC. Nearly everyone was at home, watching the news, hugging their kids, praying for the people who were missing

and known to be dead, and just generally trying to work through the shock of what had happened.

The other thing I remember clearly was just how eager people were to help. On September 12, two of my friends called to ask if I would go with them to donate blood. However, when we arrived at the Red Cross office in Old Town Alexandria, the volunteer at the door turned us away: *we have too many donors already today*, she said. *Please come back next week, if you can*. After wandering around Old Town for a bit, we drove up Interstate 395, toward the District, just to see what we could see. The fire at the Pentagon was out, though a haze of smoke still hung darkly against the clear blue sky. The impacted side of the building looked like someone had tried to cut through a layer cake with a cold knife and mangled it in the process. The upper floors had partially collapsed, and the mangled steel framing was hanging at an angle, bent and twisted by the force of the crash and the intense fire that followed.

One other thing caught our eyes. Over the top of the wrecked side defiantly hung the Stars and Stripes where the firefighters had put it the night before. HOPE, that flag screamed. Hope, that even in the midst of this calamity and the triumphant laughter of those who caused it, we would rise to rebuild. HOPE, that we would use this moment to put aside our differences for at least long enough to join our allies who'd experienced this sort of terrorism for years before this in saying, "Get behind me, Satan!" to the fear such actions are designed to instill, and to the revenge they push us to seek.

Nowhere in the bloodthirsty desire need to get revenge is there any thought of forgiveness. Revenge insists that we have to get even with whoever wronged us, no matter the cost to them, or to us. It blinds us to their humanity, and to everything else

other than the obsession with getting even. It also seems to be a lot easier to go down that path than it does the one that Jesus strongly suggests is the better one. Here's the thing: how is it even possible to forgive the perpetrators of violence like we experienced on 9/11 once, let alone seven or 77 times?

"Forgiveness," as Jesus describes it in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, assumes there's some sort of relationship present between the wronged party and the party who's doing wrong. In the world of the parable, those relationships are between the bad servant and the king, and the bad servant and a peer who owed him a lot of money. In both cases, there is a power imbalance: king to servant, and creditor to debtor. Both the king and the bad servant are given the chance to use their power to show grace and mercy. Only the king does so, and, as a result of his failure to extend the same thing to someone else, the servant ends up losing everyone.

The parable is not entirely an allegorical retelling of, "Do unto others, or else." To read it only that way is pretty unsatisfying. Nor does it allow us to really dig into the multiple layers of meaning within it. As Barbara Brown Taylor suggests in her book *The Seeds of Heaven*, what the parable actually does is to reset our thinking about. It wants us to ask hard questions, like where things came off the rails, or why the servant found himself unable to forgive a peer who owed him a small fraction of what he owed the king, or, most importantly, how we can forgive someone else when we land in a similar situation.

Taylor answers those questions this way: "If I am able to forgive at all, it is because I have been forgiven... It is an incredible experience, but it is never one of my own doing. All I have ever been able to do is ask for it – to ask for forgiveness – but

when it has been granted it has come to me from outside myself, a free gift from someone whom I have hurt... but who has decided that what is more important than getting even is to remain in relationship with me. That is, as best as I can say it, what real forgiveness is all about: pure, unadulterated grace.”¹

That grace is as much about us as it is the person or group who’s wronged us. It’s of God, freely given, and allows us to let go of those grudges, hurts, or wrongs so we aren’t consumed by them. It’s much harder to do so on the scale of an event like 9/11 than it is when someone, say, damages our car or breaks a favorite item accidentally or on purpose. We don’t usually presume to have a relationship with perpetrators of large-scale events. It is also very hard to extend grace, much less begin to try to understand what motivates someone to do something like crash a fully loaded jumbo jet into the side of a building.

It’s how we respond afterward that matters. That response starts with not giving in to our own hate and anger. It’s not easy, especially if we know someone who was directly affected. We might not get there right away, or ever, but it is what lets us turn outwardly to focus on others, rather than on our own internal battles. That is more or less where the parable leaves things. The unforgiving servant cannot see past the debt he is owed, even though his own, much greater debt had been forgiven by the king.

The servant ends up being imprisoned until he can pay the king what he owes. That will likely keep him there for the rest of his life, but it’s only making his pre-existing mental prison into a real one. “By refusing to be forgiven, and refusing to forgive, he had already created his own little Alcatraz, where he sat in solitary confinement with his

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “One More from the Heart: Matthew 18:21-35.” In *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 95.

calculator and kept track of his accounts... The message of the parable is: Do unto others as the king has *already* done unto you. It is not a matter of earning your forgiveness, or letting others off the hook so that you will be let off the hook yourself.”² Forgiveness does not mean forgetting what was done. It DOES mean accepting God’s grace so that we are able to move forward, clean up the pile of rubble left behind, and live again.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “One More from the Heart,” 98.