

September 14, 2008-Forgive. Romans 14:1-12 & Matthew 18:21-35

For a long time I had the following quote as part of the signature section of my email: 'If we really want to love, we must learn how to forgive'. - Mother Theresa.

Thursday we experienced the seventh anniversary of the Sept. 11 tragedy, a date that will be remembered for generations yet to come. It is a date that Americans consider one of the most significant in the national history. It is a date that is associated with other epic historic events such as the founding of the United States, the end of the conflict between the North and the South, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and the end of World War II. It is a date that challenged the freedom of a free people. "9/11," as many call it, is a day a free nation became even more resolute in its desire for freedom for all people - people of all races, creeds, and colors.

September 11, 2001, was also a date that challenged the grace of forgiveness that we who claim to be Christians have been told by our Lord Jesus Christ to offer, even to our enemies. Life itself is often challenging! And forgiveness is not an easy gift to give! Yet, for our own health and salvation, it is a necessity.

Jesus in today's Gospel answered Peter's question, How often should I forgive? Not seven times, but I tell you seventy-seven times. In talking about righting wrongs, Paul in his letter to the church in Rome, echoes Jesus when he says, We will all stand before the judgment seat of God. He adds a quote from Isaiah, the prophet, As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God. So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

For the last several years - beginning even before 9/11, the world has faced great outbursts of hatred, bitterness, and anger; and with the desire, of various groups and individuals, to cause harm to others. Often these actions are done in the name of God. But our God is not a God of hatred. Our God is a God of unquenchable love.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, retired Anglican bishop of South Africa and formerly chairman of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, says to forgive goes beyond the unselfish devotion to the cause of others. He adds, to forgive is a process that does not exclude hate and anger. These emotions are all part of being human. Tutu continues, You should never hate yourself for hating others who do terrible things; the depth of your love is shown by the extent of your anger. This great Anglican humanitarian and spiritual pioneer reminds us of our responsibilities. Tutu stresses that, When I talk of forgiveness, I mean the belief that you can come out the other side a better person: a better person than the one being consumed by anger and hatred. Until we find in ourselves the capacity to forgive, we continue to be linked to the cause of our anger and our unforgiving emotions. Only as we forgive are we able to move on and become the more Christ-like person that God has called us to be.

You might recall the interview with a young woman after one of the London bombings. Having been on a bombed subway train, escaping with bruises and shattered nerves, she was asked by a reporter could she forgive those who caused the bombing? She responded, I would hope that I could, but I don't know whom to forgive. Until I am able to see the face of such hatred, I do not know how deep I must dig in my spirit to find forgiveness. Hatred comes in many forms; the great hatred that causes tragedies like 9/11, the past suicide bombings in Palestine and Israel, Muslims killing Muslims, young gangs doing harm to other young people over territories controlled for drugs and worse. We must not take these actions of hatred lightly for they affect the health of the world.

Yet acts requiring forgiveness are much more personal to most of us than those cited. Incidents of simple human frailties challenge each of us to a personal level. Here are a few:

The need to find forgiveness in painful family relations.

The need to find forgiveness with an employer.

The need to find forgiveness with a friend who has deserted us.

The need to find forgiveness for the teacher who may have judged us wrongly.

The need to find forgiveness when in conflict with betrayal.

The need to find forgiveness when the church turns against our beliefs.

And the list goes on! Forgive me Lord, for I have sinned!

God is in the forgiveness business! God sent God's only Son to be the Savior of a fallen and sinful world. In Ephesians 1:7 Paul writes, In him [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the richness of his grace. Paul later reminded the Christians at Ephesus, Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you.

We often think of forgiveness as something that someone who has done us wrong must ask of us! Let's take the high road, difficult as it may be. Let us forgive the person who has wronged us before the hatred eats away at our ability to forgive. It will not be easy, but God is there to help. We can do this by offering that individual up to God, not sitting in judgment, but by simply saying, Help so and so and mend our relationship. Alexander Pope once said, To err is human, to forgive, divine. Believe it because God is the Divine. When we withhold forgiveness, we remain the victim. When we offer forgiveness, we are doing it only for our own well-being. Forgiveness allows us to move beyond the pain, the resentment, and the anger. We always have a choice; to forgive or not to forgive. When we forgive we make the choice that heals.

We may never forget the hurt we have experienced, but we can choose to forgive. As life goes on and we remember an incident that was hurtful and caused great anger, we need to remind ourselves that with God's grace we have already forgiven the one that hurt us. Time does heal memories. Time can dull the vividness of the hurt and thus the memory will fade. We must never let the person who hurt us own us. Forgiveness finally changes us from prisoners of our past to being liberated and at peace with our memories. There is a great old gospel hymn entitled, Victory in Jesus. There is greatness in being victorious because we have felt the presence of Jesus in our lives as the wind of God's Holy Spirit brings the healing power of God's mercy.

Such hellish acts as those of that tragic September 11 may take a lifetime of forgiveness, for seven years has done little to dull the memory. Every day, visualize your forgiveness as Jesus anoints you with His blessing. Visualize that God is real, that amidst this trauma God is still God. Visualize those who caused such destruction as sinful people needing the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ. Sing out the old redemptive story that some sweet day we will sing with the angels, Victory in Jesus, my Savior forever.

Whether it is the act of hateful people who killed thousands on that fateful morning in Washington, New York, and the fields of Pennsylvania; or the act of a child or parent or relative or teacher or pastor that disappointed us in whatever kind of behavior; we need to reach out to a loving God and ask God to walk with us as we struggle with the need to forgive.

God is good. He will not fail! Are we up to the task? Can we forgive as Christ forgave those who crucified him? Now once we understand forgiveness as a fundamental of Christian living, we can look to Romans 14 with new insight. (The Message version)

#### Romans 14: Cultivating Good Relationships

1 Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with - even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently.

2-4 For instance, a person who has been around for a while might well be convinced that he can eat anything on the table, while another, with a different background, might assume he should only be a vegetarian and eat accordingly. But since both are guests at Christ's table, wouldn't it be terribly rude if they fell to criticizing what the other ate or didn't eat? God, after all, invited them both to the table. Do you have any business crossing people off the guest list or interfering with God's welcome? If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help.

5 Or, say, one person thinks that some days should be set aside as holy and another thinks that each day is pretty much like any other. There are good reasons either way. So, each person is free to follow the convictions of conscience.

6-9 What's important in all this is that if you keep a holy day, keep it for God's sake; if you eat meat, eat it to the glory of God and thank God for prime rib; if you're a vegetarian, eat vegetables to the glory of God and thank God for broccoli. None of us are permitted to insist on our own way in these matters. It's God we are answerable to all the way from life to death and everything in between—not each other. That's why Jesus lived and died and then lived again: so that he could be our Master across the entire range of life and death, and free us from the petty tyrannies of each other.

10-12 So where does that leave you when you criticize a brother? And where does that leave you when you condescend to a sister? I'd say it leaves you looking pretty silly—or worse. Eventually, we're all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God. Your critical and condescending ways aren't going to improve your position there one bit. Read it for yourself in Scripture:

"As I live and breathe," God says, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will tell the honest truth that I and only I am God." So tend to your knitting. You've got your hands full just taking care of your own life before God.

So once again we are instructed that God's agape love for us motivates us to forgive quickly and to live in harmony with each other. May it be so.

Prayer:

Father, I know that I have broken your laws and my sins have separated me from you and from my fellow Christians. I am truly sorry, and now I want to turn away from my past sinful life toward you. Please forgive me, and help me avoid sinning again. I believe that your son, Jesus Christ died for my sins, was resurrected from the dead, is alive, and hears my prayer. I invite Jesus to become the Lord of my life, to rule and reign in my heart from this day forward. Please send your Holy Spirit to help me obey You, and to do Your will for the rest of my life. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.