

Sermon preached by  
The Reverend William J. Eakins  
at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, Connecticut  
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"Never forget!" We have heard these words a lot this past week. It began on Monday with the commemoration of 9/11. Never forget the evil done that day. Remember the innocent thousands who died. Remember the first responders who worked courageously to save others. Remember that we are not free of terrorism's threat. Remember because by so doing we honor the dead, celebrate our heroes, and are alert to the threat of terrorism. However, "never forget" can all too easily lead to other emotions that can infect our hearts and distort our minds when we hold onto them. Remembering 9/11 or remembering Friday's terrorist attack in London can lead to anger and fear directed not just at Al-Qaeda and its members but at all Muslims and even at all foreigners. How many of the conflicts in the world and in our personal lives are the result of the enduring remembrance of wrongs done long ago. Hence we have the Sunnis and the Shiites, the Hutus and the Tutsis, the Burmese and the Rohingyas, the Palestinians and the Israelis.

"How often should I forgive," asks Peter, and Jesus tells him 77 times. The truth is that we human beings often find it very hard to forgive someone who has offended us even one time. Despite what we say in the Lord's Prayer, we seldom forgive those who trespass against us; we seldom forgive because we never forget.

Hurts turn into resentments; resentments turn into grudges, prejudices, and a desire for vengeance and retribution. So what are we to make of Jesus' command to forgive others? How are we ever to do this difficult thing that seems to go against our natural human instinct?

I ask you to listen to three stories about punishment and forgiveness. The first story is about a Korean college student in Philadelphia who was attacked and killed by eleven gang members. Philadelphians cried out for the harshest penalty of the law. But the student's parents wrote a letter from Korea signed by twenty of his relatives. It said: "We [ask] that the most generous treatment possible within the laws of your government be given to those who committed this criminal action... [As] evidence of our sincere hope, we have started a fund for the educational, religious, and social guidance of the boys when they are released from prison. We have dared to express our hope with a spirit received from the gospel of Jesus Christ who died for our sins."

Another story: A certain tribe of primitive people punishes offenders by placing them inside a circle formed by all the members of the community. The offense is named by the chief; the offender is given no chance to speak, and then the tribe begins to cry out all the good things they know about the offender, how much he has meant to them, his deeds of bravery and deeds of kindness, the hopes they have for his future, what he can contribute to the community.

The third story is from today's Gospel: A King went to settle accounts with a slave who owed him what would be \$1.5 billion dollars by today's standards. Since the slave couldn't repay such a debt, the king ordered him to be sold, along with all he possessed. The slave promised to pay back everything, but it was an absurd promise. And yet the King, the one Jesus tells us is like God, the King forgave the man his whole debt. Yet despite the King's generosity, when the slave met a man who owed him a trifling debt, he demanded immediate repayment. When the King got wind of it, he summoned the servant. "You wicked slave," he said, "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave as I had mercy on you?" Then he handed the slave over to be punished. Jesus

continues the lesson: “So my heavenly Father will do also to you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

You can hear that Gospel parable as a warning that you’d better forgive others or else God will haul you off to jail and lose the key, but that is NOT what Jesus is saying. Instead he is telling us that God is not a bookkeeper. God doesn’t say, “If you are good, I will love you,” but “I will always love you even when you are not good because that is when you need love the most.” Jesus is not giving us a rule to save our neck; he is telling us the way things work in God’s Kingdom. He is saying that if we do not forgive each other, we will never know how God forgives us.

When we forgive someone, something happens. I don’t know what to call it, but it seems like we are being conditioned, being put in shape to receive God’s forgiveness ourselves. A woman named Corrie ten Boom, who was put in a concentration camp for hiding Jews, tells of meeting one of the camp guards after the war was over. The guard told her that he knew God had forgiven him, but he sought her forgiveness too. Ten Boom says it was the most difficult thing she had ever had to do, but she prayed for help to hold out her hand to him – and when she did, she was filled with more peace than she had ever known before.

Since the forgiven slave in Jesus’s parable didn’t forgive, he never knew that peace, never got the joy, never got the freedom of being forgiven so that he could go and forgive.

Was it the same for the gang members who killed the Korean student? Did they laugh at the naïveté of the boy’s family? Or did they leave prison new people? Did the errant tribesman lay down his spear and stop poaching game? Or did he go back to his old ways? It doesn’t matter really, does it? What matters is what happened to the Korean family and what happened to the tribe, because they got to live the rest of their lives in peace rather than in angry vengeance.

A grudge is a heavy burden to carry. Plotting retaliation eats a hole in our souls. But we are stuck with the burden and the vengeance until we forgive. Whom are we to forgive? Everyone, says Jesus. We’re not supposed to set limits where God sets none. Yes, sometimes for reasons of justice, wrongdoers must be punished. Sometimes for reasons of our safety we have to separate ourselves from violence. Abused women know that to be true. But we are to forgive them all, everyone, like Joseph forgave his undeserving brothers in Egypt. We have to forgive others not for their sake but for ours, because if we don’t forgive, we’ll be carrying around a millstone that might eventually drown us.

Sometimes it takes seventy-seven tries to forgive someone, but no matter how long it takes, we are to keep on trying. Forgive them once, forgive them twice, forgive them in words, and then try it another way. Write your forgiveness on a rock and throw it into the water; write a letter and mail it – or don’t mail it and burn it up. Wrap up a symbol of your grievance and put it far away on a high shelf where you can’t reach it. Come and pray in church. Pray for the person you would like to slaughter and ask God’s blessing on them until it finally dawns on you that love works better than hatred.

The Church is a community where God teaches us how to forgive as God does. We gather week by week to hear the Good News of how much God loves the world that God has made, including every single one of us. Here we can let down our pretensions and be honest about who we really are. It does not take long to realize that in spite of our differences we have a lot in common. We are all flawed human beings. All of us have done things we ought not to have done and failed to do what we should have done, and yet God who knows us intimately welcomes us as beloved children and feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

Today through Holy Baptism we welcome Abigail Marie Stretz into the Church of God. Not only Abigail's parents and godparents but all of us will undertake the responsibility of bringing up Abigail in the Christian faith and life. It will be through our words and more importantly our attitudes and behavior that Abigail will learn what it means to be a child of God, someone who is known and loved, imperfect but always forgiven. If we are faithful in our mission, Abigail and all our children will indeed be blessed and we will all get a glimpse of what heaven is really all about.