

## 9/11: There Goes the Neighbourhood

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Sermon given to St. John's United Church at the Maritime Conservatory

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*Scripture Passage: Matthew 18:21-35*

**What do you say... to a people who have experienced an attack by others intent on inflicting not only terror but also a total collapse of their nation?** What do you say...to a people who have watched while huge iconic buildings have been demolished before their eyes – buildings that created a recognizable landscape, that reminded them of who they were, buildings that were thought of as indestructible?

**What do you say...to people who have understood themselves to be under the unique protection of God – and yet all of this happened?** What do you say ...to a people who, more than ten years later, are traumatized, their Christian religion split into factions, seemingly no longer without common language? They are becoming a people who fight amongst themselves, creating doctrines and rules that seem to exist in contrast with the one they have known as Jesus. What do you say? What advice do you give?

**This is the problem of the writer of Matthew.** After the Roman army, led by future Emperor Titus, held siege to Jerusalem, the city was leveled and its people ravaged. The iconic, beloved Temple was utterly and completely destroyed. Some said that rocks no larger than a person's fist were left to remind them the Temple had once stood there. Jews and Christians alike were aghast. What did it mean? Where was God? How can the unforgivable ever be made right?

**There are both "micro" and "macro" implications of peace making in the world.** Matthew's Jesus reminds us that the most important, and the most difficult thing we can do, is begin with the micro, that is, the extremely local. How the kingdom of God manifests itself in the global, macro world truly flows out of how we treat one another within micro communities, particularly around how we forgive one another. Nothing is more local and micro than a church community. Well after Jesus' death, the writer of Matthew reminds his church community of their Savior's challenging words about this. Whether you live in the 1<sup>st</sup> or the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is nothing quite like a church fight. If you have been part of a church fight you know that there is nothing quite like it for acrimony, bitterness, hurt feelings and just plain old meanness. In some senses it is a testimony to the excellent, intimate nature of church relationships. That is to say, you are only invested with that much energy if the relationship between you and the offensive "other" is important to you and a familiar. Interdependency, the hallmark of Christian community, (unlike total independence and isolation encouraged by our culture), is complicated and sticky. But, oh, when it works well, like the best of family

relations, it truly is heaven on earth. It is easy to expound about world peace, terrorism and the state of States. It is much more difficult to make peace with your brother/sister/friend/colleague/fellow parishioner. Matthew records that Jesus said one flows directly out of the other. The macro flows out of the micro.

**This section of Matthew is all about the radical nature of God's grace, love and forgiveness.** Children are held up as models, lost sheep are irrationally searched for and badly behaved church members are gently but firmly reprov'd by people who care about them. Hearing all of this, Peter, with his usual bravado is keen to show the teacher that he, more than the others, gets it. He asks Jesus about forgiving a church member who sins against him. Knowing that a rabbinical tradition advises a forgiveness regimen of three times, Peter suggests to Jesus that perhaps seven times might be more appropriate? Not even close, Jesus says. Try seventy times. Some old manuscripts even suggest Jesus said seventy times seven. In other words – too many to count. As if that wasn't surprising enough, Jesus then continues with a shocking parable.

**Before we look at the parable, please remember that parables are models that demonstrate things in a way that are indescribable using any other method.** There is a point at which parables reveal and then, pushed too far, they collapse. When Jesus uses metaphors, symbols and parables, he is NOT being literal. For example, when Jesus refers to himself as a door, we are pretty sure he is not saying he has a doorknob and splinters. Parables, in particular, express an extreme to describe the kingdom of God – the dynamics, ethos, activity, action and power of how God is active in our lives in the here and now. They are meant to crack open inside of you. So be prepared.

**So, Jesus says, there once was a slave who owed ten thousand talents to his king.** One talent was equal to fifteen years wages of one average labourer. Therefore ten thousand talents are the wages of 150,000 labourers. I did some math. If we assume the minimum wage of a labourer today was twenty thousand dollars per year, then the total amount owed in today's standards would be three *billion* dollars. Clearly, this is an un-payable amount. The king says, "You owe me 3 billion dollars. Pay now, please." The slave trembles and cries and pleads. In response to this, the King does a completely unexpected thing. He forgives the entire debt. Not part of it; the whole thing. He does not ask to trade for something else. He does not require an installment plan. He just forgives the whole amount and absorbs the debt at great cost to himself.

**We can only imagine how relieved the slave felt.** His family did not have to be sold into slavery. In fact, he came out better than he could ever have imagined. That giant monkey on his back was no longer there. He was freed up to truly live! What does he do? No sooner has he left the room than he encounters a slave who owes him trifling amount, a hundred denarii which is a hundred days wages, or five thousand dollars in contemporary terms.

**The sheer injustice of this contrast begins to filter through the slave community.**

They begin to talk. This gets back to the king who is not impressed at all. After having incurred great loss to free the slave from his 3 billion dollar debt, the King is most angered by the slave's lack of gratitude and his cruelty toward his fellow slaves. The king, it appears listens to the cries of the vulnerable and powerless and, in fact, has a preferential option toward them. The king imprisons the unforgiving slave until he is able to pay his entire debt. It is not clear at all how this can happen. Being unforgiving when one has been forgiven much brings big, big trouble. That much is clear.

**Disputes arise amongst communities and between people who love each other.** This is a fact of life. When we are believers in Christ, there is an implicit and explicit understanding that we have a special ethical demand to forgive. This is very troubling, because to forgive is very demanding. What, exactly does forgiveness mean? First, it is probably easier to describe what forgiven is not. Forgiveness is not careless or indifferent, or easy. Forgiveness is not permissiveness, does it mean approving of injustice. Forgiveness does not imply letting go of ethical standards. After all, if there was no sense of ethical standards or rules, there would not arise a sense of them having been violated and thus the need for reproof, repentance and forgiveness. Forgiveness takes hurt, woundedness, broken relationships very seriously. Forgiveness is offered in the context of repentance, recognition by the violator of having done violence and a demonstrated commitment to turning to a new path. Having said that, justice demands that forgiveness is not a burden placed upon the wounded. Forgiveness, for so many years imposed by the church, especially upon women and children, created many more violations. Susan Hysten, a Presbyterian minister said that in situations of spousal violence where the church implored women to "forgive" their husbands, it wasn't the women that were lacking - it was the church. The women lacked a community of fellow slaves who, would recognizing the injustice would then challenge the violation, the violator and require accountability. <sup>i</sup>

**Forgiveness is not the action of saying a violation was okay.** Rather, it is the action of letting go of the power of both the violation and the violator. Rabbi Harold Kushner said famously to a woman whose husband had left her in dire straits, that she is asked to forgive because the man did not deserve the power to live in her head and turn her into a bitter angry person. After many years she was holding on to him. In doing so, she was not hurting him; she was hurting herself. <sup>ii</sup>

**We hurt ourselves when we become as mean, unforgiving and as violent as those who have violated us.** On May 2<sup>nd</sup>, the day after Osama Bin Laden was killed, I was driving to a meeting and listening to *As It Happens* on CBC Radio One. Donna Marsh O'Connor, who leads a group called "September 11 Families for a Peaceful Tomorrow," lost a pregnant daughter in the Twin Towers. She described both her sadness and relief that this bad man, Osama Bin Laden had been assassinated. She was relieved he was now prevented from killing others, but also regretted that he had not been brought to trial.

She related a story about a woman who, feeling great at the news of the killing, had told her ten year old son, born shortly after his father's death, that the bad man who had murdered his father had been killed. The boy began to ask her questions about how Bin Laden had died. He expressed surprise that his own country could go into another country and kill someone without trial. It seems to me, that when a boy can ask a question like that, the terrorists have not won – yet. When a small boy deprived of his father can expect justice, we still have hope. With hope there is a possibility of not being bound to the control and agenda of terrorism – in short there is the possibility of forgiveness. The possibility of letting go of the power of terror and torture.

**It is very easy on this tenth anniversary weekend to have opinions about 911, particularly about how our neighbours to the south of us should respond.** It is also very safe to have opinions. After all, it is really a situation that is “out there.” It is a macro situation. However, Matthew makes it clear that Jesus says the unsafe, sticky micro situations are really where the macro ones find their birth and death. We have been hearing this week many stories of gratitude and frank astonishment expressed by Americans for the hospitality of Nova Scotians and Newfoundlanders. The extraordinary events in Gander, a town that doubled in size as they sought to house stranded Americans was given special highlight. It does not surprise me at all that people would take stranded strangers into their houses indefinitely and without second thought. I spent my teen years in Gander. That is what they do. They also are a culture of knowing everyone's business and are pretty sure they have a right to comment on it, especially if you were a teenage girl doing unladylike things. The two attributes go together; they are opposite sides of the same coin. Believing that you are part of a community that is important to you leads to you to think that you have a right to say what happens in and to that community.

**In Halifax much has been made about the protest and complaining that happens around proposed developments or changes of just about any kind.** Indeed, when I describe the kind of process and difficulty we have experienced to my colleagues who have done similar work in other parts of the country, they are astonished. Here is the rub - people only come out if they feel committed enough to their community to think big things are at stake, like certain community values. Only such a community is capable of expressing extreme hospitality. We really do not get one without the other. It is a very good thing. So to a room full of people of diverse and opposing opinions, we really should be saying “thanks” and remembering houses full of stranded American passengers. We should be proud of being part of an Easter Canadian culture that says to the stranded stranger, “Of course, you will come into our homes; of course we will open up our schools and flood them with volunteers and food. That is what a community does. And, by the way, if you change my community? Buddy, you are going to hear about it.”

**Macro and micro peacemaking depends on forgiveness.** There is a frightening aspect of forgiveness that this parable of the ungrateful slave makes clear. We are forgiven as we forgive others. I am directly responsible for the extent of my own forgiveness? This frightens me, because I really suck at that. I would like to wiggle out of that responsibility and say, well, it is just a parable after all. Then I read a little further in Matthew and see that Jesus introduces the Lord's Prayer. We have been saying this every single Sunday for almost 2000 years. I personally say it every single day. The implications are starkly clear. "Forgive us as we forgive those who sin against us." Am I really asking God to limit God's forgiveness to only what my paltry abilities at relationships can manage? How is this possible? Then I remember the verse immediately before the parable. Perhaps, next to the Lord's Prayer it is one of the most well known, oft cited passages in the bible, "where two or three are gathered, there I am also." We gather. Then the one who loves us can help us with the tricky bits, including the necessity of forgiving the gatherers from time to time.

**So, this coming Wednesday at the Public Information Meeting** (for St. John's Redevelopment of our old church property), and in gatherings all over the North America on this tenth anniversary of 911, there Christ is also. Empowering us to macro and micro forgive. Thank God.

**Sources:**

Cleghorn, Charlotte Dudley as found in Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year A, Volume 4. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011,

Metzger, Bruce and Roland E. Murphy, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, NRSV, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991

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<sup>i</sup>P. 72. Cleghorn, Charlotte Dudley as found in Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year A, Volume 4. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, p. 72.

<sup>ii</sup> P. 72 Ibid.