

September 17, 2023 16th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Genesis 50:15-21, Psalm 103:1-7, 8-13
Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

[David Brooks in the Atlantic: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/09/us-culture-moral-education-formation/674765/>. SALT project's blog: <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/9/7/beyond-measure-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-fifteenth-week-after-pentecost>. Boatlift video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18lsxFcDrio>. Diana Butler Bass' piece from September 11 called Remembering: https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/remembering?utm_source=substack&publication_id=47400&post_id=136933227&utm_medium=email&utm_content=share&utm_campaign=email-share&triggerShare=true&isFreemail=true&r=1dkeho]

The Path of Mercy

Grace and peace, compassion and mercy, to you, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.

This past Monday morning, as our house was getting going,

one kid out the door,
a teenager at the table eating breakfast,
backpacks and lunch bags awaiting the day...

I realized, with a start, that it was 9/11.

In a moment I was taken back to that morning, nearly exactly 22 years ago, to the hour.

Do you remember that morning? Some of you do.

Such a pretty day.

We were living in south Minneapolis in a rented duplex.

We'd gone for a run.

We'd voted in some local election, not sure which one or for what,

and chatted with the neighborhood poll workers....who'd already heard the news.

You know the news, the attacks on the World Trade Center.

Later we'd hear about the Pentagon,

the hijacked plane in Pennsylvania,
the tremendous, devastating grief that has followed,
changing – forever - the path for those who lost loved ones,
changing the direction for our nation and our world.

My 14 year old, who is a bit of a news junky in their own right, knew exactly what day it was.

But they don't have a memory of what was happening,

or what it felt like, or how our country responded.

They don't know the complex ripple effects here at home and around the world,

or the shift this had in our nations's war-making and in our view of race and religion and diversity.
the way fear penetrated our psyches,

Remembering is so important.

How often should I forgive?” That’s Peter’s question to Jesus in this morning’s gospel.

“As many as seven times?” Peter wonders aloud, guessing high, probably expecting affirmation. To which Jesus responds, “No, not seven times, but seventy-seven times,”
or in some translations, “70 times 7”.

This section of Matthew is important.

There’s the story of the shepherd with 100 sheep, who going out finds the one who is lost. There’s last week’s guidance about conflict: go first to that person, one to one. Then on the heels of conflict, there’s today’s reading about forgiving not 7 times, but 77 times.

A parable follows that little interaction between Peter and Jesus.

It’s a challenging parable that is too-often used in ways oblivious to tone, for it includes reference to slaves, and wealth and power.

The reign of heaven could be compared to this...

Basically, a king wants to settle accounts with his slaves, so they come one by one. Pay up, the king says, but then in response to the man’s plea for patience, the king shifts gears and forgives the impossibly-large debts of this man, This transaction has financial impacts, and generational ripples, for this allows his family, his spouse and kids, to stay together. But then that same man goes out the door, meets another who owes him and isn’t able to pay up, and he has this fellow thrown into prison. Hearing what happened, the king is irate: **Should you not have mercy, like I had mercy on you?**

Dear ones, Jesus’ way, Jesus’ reign, the reign of heaven, at its best,

it is rooted – all of it, conflict, forgiveness, all the things – it is rooted in MERCY, in being claimed in a love that is greater than ourselves, and held in a grace beyond our understanding.

Should you not have mercy, like I had mercy on you?

In God’s way, there’s a correlation between the forgiveness we receive and the forgiveness we give, between the mercy we experience and the mercy we share.

Today’s reading can be complicated.

Let me offer a few thoughts:

First, a caveat.

Forgiveness and mercy have been preached and whispered and used in ways that aren't helpful and can be deadly, say for someone experiencing abuse who is told to forgive their abuser and return to them.

That's not what this passage is saying, nor should it be used (ever) in this way.

In this passage and others like it,

Jesus chooses situations where the forgiver stands in a place of power and security.

Forgiveness should not extend unhealthy situations or harm or injustice, it doesn't acquiesce to harm.

Second. I've come to love how Jesus says forgive 77 times.

Sometimes we like to have sweeping assurance, everything is forgiven, forever, for always.

But have you noticed that we include Confession and Forgiveness in worship nearly every Sunday?

This passage reminds us that each interaction, every debt, is forgiven.

There's that testy interaction I had on a recent evening with said 14 year old,

nothing huge, and yet words I later regretted, words tied with little strings that connect to a million other things, words that weren't as merciful as I wish they had been, and words that left me in need of some forgiveness, some mercy.

Maybe you can identify? Anyone?

I forgive as I've been forgiven.

I act out of mercy, as I've experienced mercy.

This trust, this assurance, *that we are forgiven*

can have a profound effect on our interactions, our psyches, our world.

Then. In a recent piece in the Atlantic, called *How America Got Mean*,

David Brooks writes: "We're enmeshed in some sort of emotional, relational, and spiritual crisis, and it undergirds our political dysfunction and the general crisis of our democracy."

Brooks reminds us that "healthy moral ecologies don't just happen.

They have to be seeded and tended by people who think and talk in moral terms,

who try to model moral behavior, who understand that we have to build moral communities..."

Peter and Jesus know this.

Joseph with his brothers: Joseph knows this.

There's a humbleness here, a practicing, building on habits, for kids and teens and grown ups.

We forgive, because we're forgiven.

We show mercy, because we experience mercy.

And. The Holy Spirit and Healing

Forgiveness is a practice, and, I believe, it's often a gift of the Holy Spirit.

I can know in my brain that forgiveness is good.

I can work toward it, pray for it, but the power of forgiveness comes, for me, at least, as a gift, a healing.

And similarly mercy most often shows up as a gift of the Spirit.

Forgiveness doesn't mean the relationship necessarily returns to how it was, many times, it can't.

But forgiveness sets us free, opens us to new stages of healing, gifts us with grace.

Finally. Remembering.

Historian and theologian Diana Butler Bass wrote this week about September 11th.

She shared a story I hadn't heard before and a link to a short documentary that I'll pass along

As the towers fell and people ran for their lives, many found themselves at the water's edge,
for Manhattan is indeed an island.

A spontaneous call went out for boats; 100s of boats answered the call—tug boat, ferries, cargo crafts.

Together, over 9 hours, they evacuated 500,000 people from Manhattan.

They made a path of love. They practiced Mercy, when they could have opt not.

Reflecting on 9/11 and all the geo-political things still unfolding 22 years later, Diana Butler Bass muses,
"Instead of learning from the best of the human spirit, we learned to see enemies everywhere.

Paranoia gripped us — we sunk into fear, scapegoating, propaganda, and revenge."

"Eventually," she continues, "we turned what we'd learned on our neighbors.

There's a direct connection between what happened *then* and our domestic politics *now*.

We could have followed a path of love through the toxic cloud. Instead, we walked a different way."

And that brings us back to identity: You, beloved ones, are forgiven.

I'll say it again, and more directly: In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

We can choose the path of love.

We can trust grace to guide us.

And leaning into mercy, God's mercy, we **can forgive** one another. Thanks be to God. Amen.