

“What Does It Take to Forgive?”

Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35

September 14, 2014

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

Many of us know exactly where we were 13 years ago when terrorists hijacked commercial airliners and used them as flying bombs to destroy the World Trade Towers and damage the Pentagon. And if we do not have those images in our mind’s eye we have surely seen the videotapes.

One of the things we remember about that day is heroism: ordinary people doing extraordinary things in unimaginable circumstances. Consider United Flight 93, which crashed in an open field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania because Todd Beamer, Jeremy Glick and passengers and crew fought back against the terrorists. The 43 minute delay in their take-off from Newark International Airport gave them time to learn what had happened in New York and at the Pentagon and to realize that their plane, too, was a missile. Their attempt to retake control of the plane failed but they undoubtedly foiled an attempt to destroy either the Capitol or the White House.

We know this because of the cell phone messages and especially Todd Beamer’s call on a GTE Airphone to Lisa Jefferson, a supervisor with 18 years experience at the customer care center in Oakbrook, Illinois. She talked through the hijacking with Todd, the plan to react, and Todd’s now-famous words as the passengers launched their counter-attack: “Let’s roll!”

What is not often said is that Todd Beamer was a Christian. An active member of the Princeton Alliance Church, he recited both the Lord’s Prayer and the 23rd Psalm on the phone to Lisa Jefferson before giving his life to save others. (1)

-
- (1) Let’s Roll: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Courage, Beamer, Lisa with Ken Abraham, Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois, 2002, pp. 212-214.

Heroism may be the most dramatic form of virtue. Virtue comes in many forms: fighting evil, building strong communities of family and faith, teaching children healthy choices are but a few. And forgiveness. Forgiveness is a virtue and an imperative for the Christian.

Forgiveness is one of the hardest things we can accomplish. In light of September 11, 2001, I can feel my skin crawl—perhaps you can, too—at the thought of forgiving enemies. Yet today’s readings say that very thing. When he had the power to exact revenge, Joseph instead forgave his brothers who sold him into slavery. Jesus tells a story in which the one who fails to forgive is punished for his own misdeeds—we all have them!—with the warning: *“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”*

What does it take to forgive? First, it takes change. Change can be positive but it always means giving up something. On a light note, the Pope was approached by the Hostess company to substitute their product for bread in the Holy Communion. “Of course not,” replied the Pope. “But Holy Father,” replied Hostess’ marketers, “we are prepared to pay \$10 billion U.S. for this franchise.” “Absolutely not,” responds His Eminence. “Can you imagine the faithful having to pray, ‘Give us this day our daily Twinkie?’” “Holy Father, we could consider \$20 billion U.S.” So back and forth the conversation went.

Some days later the Pope addressed the College of Cardinals. “Brothers, I have been good news and bad news. The good news is that the Hostess company has given \$50 billion to the Church. The bad news is that we’ve lost the Wonder Bread account.”

Would that forgiveness could be a laughing matter. It is often so very hard. Joseph’s story bears this out. In the end, he forgives the brothers who sold him into slavery. One could say, with Shakespeare, that “all’s well that ends well,” but Joseph went through the ringer on the way to forgiveness. He was bought by

Pontiphar and earned his trust, only to be thrown into prison after being unjustly accused of making advances on Pontiphar's wife. While in prison Joseph interpreted dreams and the interpretations came true. This news reached the leader of all Egypt, Pharaoh, who was troubled by a dream that Joseph correctly interpreted as predicting seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. By correctly interpreting the dream, Joseph was placed as Pharaoh's assistant in charge of managing the food storehouses. During the famine the word spread that Egypt had food, so Joseph's brothers came looking for it and Joseph recognized them, but they did not recognize him. Although Joseph had the power to exact revenge, he did not, saying that his brothers meant it for evil but God meant it for good. Forgiveness takes change.

Second, forgiveness takes remembering. Sometimes we admonish others, "Oh, forgive and forget." In fact, forgiving specifically requires remembering. That's what makes it hard. We don't want to remember. Or we remember and so stay always on guard against another hurt, to protect ourselves.

Funny, though. Did you ever notice how selective our memory is? At least, mine is. We remember those wrongs against us and more easily forget our wrongs against others. C.S. Lewis, in his book, Mere Christianity, reflects on it this way:

"For a long time I used to think this a silly, straw-splitting distinction: how could you hate what a man did and not hate the man? But years later it occurred to me that there was one man to whom I had been doing this all my life—namely myself. However much I might dislike my own cowardice or conceit or greed, I went on loving myself. There had never been the slightest difficulty about it. In fact, the very reason why I hated the things was that I love the man. Just because I loved myself, I was sorry to find that I was the sort of man who did those things. Consequently, Christianity does not want us to reduce by one atom the hatred we feel for cruelty and treachery. We ought to hate them. But it does want us to hate them in the same way in which we hate things in ourselves: being sorry that the man [or woman, ed.] should have done such things, and hoping, if it is anyway possible, that somehow, sometime, somewhere, he can be cured and made human again."

The slave in Matthew's story forgot he was forgiven. Lord knows how he accumulated a debt of "ten thousand talents." Since a talent was more than 15 years wages for a laborer, the debt was more than could be repaid in 1,700 lifetimes! An unimaginable debt, billions of dollars. Desperate, he promises the king the impossible: "Have patience with me and I will pay you everything." The king, out of pity, forgave the debt.

Happy ending, right? Wife and family preserved, fresh start? Ah, humans. We just don't seem to know when we've been cut a break. The guy goes out and shakes down another slave who owed him a hundred denarii. Now, that's no small amount. A denarii was a day's wages for a laborer, so a little more than three months wages for a working person, say \$10,000. Don't get distracted. Compared to 1,700 lifetimes of wages? Please.

The slave remembered the wrong thing—the debt owed to him, not the debt he was forgiven—and the result was torture.

Forgiveness takes change, and remembering, and practice. Some people can will immediate forgiveness but for most of us it is an acquired taste. The practice of forgiveness does not condone hurtful behavior but it allows us to let go and begin afresh. While sooner is usually better since we never know how much time we have, it is still important to realize that some things need to work themselves out. I think our practice of forgiveness would be better if we honored it as a process that *takes time* rather than forcing it as an act of will at a particular *point in time*.

And stating the obvious, forgiveness takes desire. One form of desire is prayer, including the prayer we pray at least once a week, "*forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" We have to **want** to forgive as a way to know God better and the forgiveness God freely offers.

Sometimes people defend their lack of desire to forgive by stating that this is the way of the world, and we have to fight fire

with fire. That only works one place I know: trained professionals light a backfire, which burns against the original fire and the two burn themselves out. Yet even a backfire is guaranteed to burn up a certain amount of good stuff. And out-of-control, it can burn houses to the ground. Forgiveness takes the desire to put the cooling waters of peace on the burning coals of resentment.

So preacher, how are you doing at practicing what you preach? At least with respect to the terrorists, not as well as Lisa Beamer, Todd's widow, whose example shames my own. Several months after the attacks she addressed a conference and said *"I've chosen to live in hope. The reason...is not because I am a strong person [but] because of the heavenly, eternal perspective God has given me...God has a plan for me, a plan to prosper me and not harm me; a plan to give me a hope and a future. It was true on September 11 and it will be true for as many years as God has left for me..."* (2)

Lisa Beamer and her family live this hope through the foundation established in Todd's memory, not called Heroic Choices (www.heroicchoices.org) which declares *"Heroic Choices remains true to the spirit of Todd Beamer as we move beyond the events of Sept. 11, 2001 turning tragedy into triumph for children who have suffered from trauma to help them for the rest of their lives."* The Beamers used the experience of trauma for them and their children to help others so traumatized.

What does it take to forgive? Changing, remembering, practicing and praying. Doing so lightens our heart and open us to receive the forgiveness of a merciful and loving God who desires, for all of us, full and abundant life. Amen.

(2) Ibid., p. 276