

## **Forgiveness is the Bridge between Memory, Fear and Hope**

“Peter came and said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’” Matthew 18:21

On September 11, 2001, death and destruction traumatized our country. This event rent scars upon the landscapes of New York, Washington DC, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania and it changed everything. Most of all perhaps it made us all too aware of how fragile and vulnerable we are in this world in which we live.

Feelings of fragility and vulnerability can make us very fearful of the world and the people around us, and, if we are not careful, as we seek to isolate ourselves from the pain that traumatic events can cause, we run the very great risk of isolating ourselves from everything that is wonderful in the world, as well. As this anniversary visited us again on Monday amid Irma and Harvey’s destruction, and a country deeply politically divided, I believe we are standing between memory, fear, and hope.

I say this even as my heart is painfully troubled that it still takes disasters of epic proportions to unite us. The human compassion and courage we have seen in Texas and unfolding in Florida is so compelling and beautiful. But, we must also admit that absent disaster we are tearing ourselves apart over everything from immigration, race, climate change, sexuality and more.

I am not going to make a statement on these issues at this time; I am simply highlighting that while some of these issues have been with us for some time and others more recent, the lack of civility in our public discourse has become as brutal and destructive as the hurricanes that have ravaged our country. I always marvel that Jesus and Peter’s discussion on forgiveness comes each year in our Lectionary as we remember the anniversary of 9/11. I believe with all of my heart that forgiveness—true, deep, God-focused forgiveness—

is the very thing that builds the bridge that we walk over to real healing.

We hear Peter ask Jesus, "How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" That sounds generous in the extreme, at least to me. And, if any of you have ever had to forgive anyone even more than one time, that second time feels like a pretty far road to travel.

So, now we hear Jesus say, "No, Peter! Not seven times, but seventy-seven times," or, in some translations, "seventy times seven", all of which is to say, as many times as it takes—70x7 represents a nonsensically large, uncountable number.

As we stumble around in our own lives, as Joan Chittister says, "God forgives us our public failures and our private destructions; God forgives our pettiness, and our lack of generosity in the face of another’s transgressions. God forgives our blindness and our denials."

Our downfall is often that we want mercy for ourselves but we want to exact justice for the remainder of humankind. God on the other hand, as Jesus’ teaching illustrates, desires justice, but when justice is too pale a thing and devoid of hope, God gives mercy. God gives mercy like a rushing river; God dispenses mercy like a running stream.

Jesus teaches us that forgiveness is the way to holiness (wholeness). In modern psychological terms, forgiveness is the way to mental health, to personal growth, to national understanding; forgiveness is the way to freedom of the soul.

And as we remember another anniversary of 9/11, we know that we are not the first to experience such a huge rent in the fabric of our nation or in our understanding of humanity. In one of her talks, Joan Chittister shared this prayer that was reportedly found pinned to a dead body when the concentration camps in Germany were liberated:

O Lord, Remember not only the men and women of goodwill, but all those of ill will. But do not remember all of the suffering They have inflicted upon us; Remember the fruits we have bought

because of this suffering--- Our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, Our courage, our generosity, The greatness of heart

Which has grown out of all of this; And when they come to judgment, Let all the fruits which we have borne Be their forgiveness. Amen.

When we choose forgiveness, true peace comes. If we seek retribution rather than a new beginning, then we reproduce evil in abundance and we repeat evil everywhere. Jesus calls us to another way.

We have so much work to do as a nation; so much healing needs to happen. I pray that Harvey and Irma and the memory of 9/11 can help us move past our hatreds and propel us into understanding that the God of Hope is found in unlimited forgiveness and in a public discourse that seeks to unite us amid our diverse views. I pray that we may all have the courage and compassion to stop being afraid of one another and allow God's love to rule our hearts and minds.

Forgiveness is the bridge that allows us to pass from bitter memory and fear to exuberant hope. As a people of faith, forgiveness is the wealth that God gives us in great measure so that we might spend it indiscriminately in God's world.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+