

WHAT ABOUT ENEMIES?

Exodus 14:19-31, OT p. 60
Exodus 15:1b-11,20-21, OT p. 61
Romans 12:14-21, NT p. 162
Matthew 18:21-35, NT p. 20

September 11, 2011
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Marilyn Allen

Forgiveness is important. Forgiveness is essential! That parable is an in-your-face challenge to examine our own attitudes toward others. If we do not forgive, we torture ourselves with painful memories and bitterness and a desire for revenge. If we do not receive the forgiveness offered by God, and take it to heart, we become hardened to those who have wronged us. If we keep count of the offenses and irritations we have experienced, we'll find it hard to forgive. Forgiveness is important, but it's easier said than done.

Contemporary Christian author, Marjorie Thompson, calls forgiveness a choice. She writes: "To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment might seem. It is in this sense that one may speak of "forgetting"; not that the actual wound is ever completely forgotten, but that its power to hold us trapped in continual replay of the event... is broken."

That conscious choice to forgive can be costly. We are not eager to let go. It's much more natural to want revenge. But failure to forgive is also costly. We tie ourselves up in knots when we refuse to release another. We carry a heavy burden ourselves when we demand that others repay. We expend too much effort hiding our own weaknesses so that we won't be held to the standards we impose on others. Refusing to forgive keeps us from knowing the depth of love and the height of joy that God wills for us, for all people. And yet we are too often unwilling and maybe unable to forgive, because we are so focused on protecting ourselves and judging others.

But the good news is this – what we can't do, God can. God's forgiveness is ready and waiting for us, has been since before the beginning. God doesn't force us to receive it, however. We have to be willing to receive, or at least we have to be willing to become willing. As we receive forgiveness, then we are able to offer that forgiveness to one another. When we open our hearts and minds and hands to the forgiving love of God, we are set free.

So what does that mean on this September 11th, this tenth anniversary of the deliberate evil that came crashing into buildings and into our lives? We live so far away from Ground Zero, and not many of us have spent much time in New York, so I don't know how much direct impact that had on your life or mine. We grieved with the country as a whole. Now, on this tenth anniversary, we have the opportunity to reflect on what has happened since then: wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which still continue; security lines at airports; collection of personal information from libraries and phone companies; suspicion of those who might look like a possible enemy. This seems like a

good time to evaluate where those actions have taken us, and whether there is a more Christ-like response. How can we set things right?

Forgiveness can be part of the process. I don't pretend to think that suddenly we'll all forgive those responsible for what happened ten years ago. I'm not that naive. However, I do believe that each one of us can take some steps in the direction of forgiveness, even of enemies, in the sense of letting go of the need for revenge. Ending war would be a good place to start.

Maybe we could even go so far as to welcome those we think we might have reason to fear. We held an information time here after worship one Sunday in October 2001, and invited a speaker from the Muslim Educational Trust. Other churches in the years since have done much more, though of course some have gone the opposite direction.

A story from Tennessee, from the *Sojourners* website:

Rev. Steve Stone was just trying to be a good neighbor. Two years ago, the pastor of Heartsong Church [a contemporary-style Methodist church] in Cordova, Tennessee, on the outskirts of Memphis, learned that a local mosque had bought property right across the street from the church. So he decided some Southern hospitality was in order.

A few days later, a sign appeared in front of the church. "Heartsong Church welcomes Memphis Islamic Center to the neighborhood," it read.

That small act of kindness was the start of an unlikely friendship between the two congregations, one that made headlines around the world. Members of the mosque and church have shared meals together, worked at a homeless shelter, and become friends over the past two years. When Stone learned that his Muslim friends needed a place to pray for Ramadan because their building wasn't ready, he opened up the doors of the church and let them hold Ramadan prayers there.

Critics said that Stone was a heretic for allowing people of another faith to pray in his church building. He says he's just doing what Jesus taught him to do. "Jesus told us to love our neighbors," Stone told *Sojourners*. "These people are actually neighbors."

....About 20 church members ... left once the Ramadan prayers started. Among them were several close friends of Beth Ewing and her husband, Duane. Duane said he was disappointed to see his friends leave the church – and sad for them as well. "They've missed so much," he said.

Having close ties to the mosque has allowed church members to make friends with Muslims and to deal with their fear of Islam. They know more about the faith of their Muslim friends.... The church's friendship with the mosque is part of following Jesus. "Everything we've done we've done as a witness for Jesus," [the pastor] said. "God will take care of the rest."

It's up to us to take some steps toward forgiveness and reconciliation. God will take care of the rest. God will sort out the details. That's what the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church in Rome, was saying. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the

Lord.” Of course, Paul doesn’t say how God might do that, just that it isn’t up to us. Then he quotes an old saying from the book of Proverbs: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink, for in so doing, you will heap coals of fire on his head.” Whatever that means! – maybe kindness will make the enemy angry because now there is no excuse for revenge, or maybe it will make him or her burn with shame. Another way to put it – “Kill your enemies, with kindness.”

Forgiveness of national enemies, of our own personal enemies, of the deeply-hidden parts of ourselves that trip us up – none of it is easy. It is indeed risky to let go of the anger and resentment that may have defined us for so long. It was a risk for the Israelites to leave Egypt. When they got to the Red Sea, the Lord told Moses to tell the people put their feet in the water. They had to take the first step, and then the wind of God blew and made a path through the sea, a way out of no way, and they were on the road to freedom.

Friends, forgiveness is like that. God is ready to move, when we are ready. That line from the Lord’s Prayer states it clearly: “Forgive our debts, or our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us.” We have to be willing. We have to make a conscious decision to overcome evil with good. Now I can’t guarantee that a few courageous people willing to forgive will change the world, but I can assure you that forgiveness will change your life. As you accept God’s forgiveness, as you become willing to forgive yourself and others, you will be set free to go forward with God, into a life of purpose and joy.

Let us pray. Merciful God, give us the spirit of peace, that we may live today in a spirit of forgiveness. May we welcome one another, as you have welcomed us in Jesus Christ. Amen.