

THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Year A, Lectionary 24

September 11, 2011

Genesis 50:15-21

Psalm 103:1-13

Matthew 18:21-35

Pastor David Tryggestad

Concordia Evangelical Lutheran Church

Duluth, Minnesota

The signboard in front of Glen Avon Presbyterian Church just down Woodland Avenue reads “70 Times 7 Meets 9-11,” or we might say, “77 Times Meets 9-11,” depending on translation.

Scripture always engages us where we are, and it is telling, I think, that our lectionary readings for today—readings that were assigned many years ago—thrust themselves into the conversation on this day, the tenth anniversary of 9/11.

Ten years ago, immediately after that tragic day, when the whole world grieved with us, our churches were filled as we expressed our collective grief. It was a time of deep lament. Our religious tradition, especially in the Psalms and Lamentations, is steeped in lament, and we have much to offer the world to give voice to collective grief.

But we are uncomfortable in lament. Even in the church, we don't want to go there; we prefer the happier texts. And the public is impatient in lament. Ten years ago, we moved from lament very quickly to a mood of vengeance, and vengeance has become our culture, it has become our DNA. As a people, we have become fearful, even paranoid, and even our politicians openly snipe at one another.

Then along come our texts for today.

Consider our First Lesson from the end of Genesis. Joseph, of the coat-of-many-colors fame, finally has the opportunity to take revenge for what his brothers had done to him. We remember the story. Out of jealousy, as Joseph was their father's favorite son, his brothers sell him into slavery and convinced their father, Jacob, that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. Joseph ends up a slave of the Egyptian, Potiphar, who learns to trust Joseph with his household finances. But Potiphar's wife has designs on Joseph, and when Joseph will not cooperate with her seductions, she goes to her husband accusing Joseph of attempting to force himself upon her. Potiphar throws Joseph in prison. While there, Joseph's ability to interpret dreams becomes known to the Pharaoh, the ruler of all of Egypt. Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams about the seven fat and seven lean cows to foresee seven years of abundance followed by seven years of drought and famine. The Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of all the agriculture in Egypt, who stores food during the abundant years to feed the country during the years of drought and famine. It is during these years of drought that Joseph's brothers show up, looking for food. From this point in the story we read some of the most tender, heart-wrenching scenes in all of scripture.

Over and over, Joseph, who conceals his identity from his brothers, steals away to weep at the sight of his brothers these many years later. Over and over again, Joseph has the opportunity to take his revenge, but he repays his brothers with generosity. Finally, when his brothers come back to Egypt for the third time, Joseph reveals himself to his astonished brothers. Joseph sends his brothers back to Canaan to fetch their father, Jacob, and to bring him with them to Egypt. For the old man Jacob, who mourned the supposed death of his son many years ago, the sight of his son alive overwhelms him with joy. For his brothers, their joy is tempered by the question, “What will Joseph do to us when our father dies?” They go so far as to make up a story when in fact their father, Jacob, does die, telling Joseph that their father had implored Jacob to forgive his brothers. Joseph’s response must have astonished his fearful brothers: “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? . . . So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.”

Instead of vengeance and revenge, Joseph offers forgiveness and hospitality.

Then comes our psalm. The antiphon sings, “Lord, you are full of compassion and mercy.” The antiphon serves as the bridge to the gospel, where Peter asks Jesus how many times he must forgive. Peter is obviously a bean counter, a score keeper: “If *he* does this, then *I’ll* do that; if *she* says this, then *I’ll* say that. Now this is the second time *he* has done this, so *I’ll* up the ante and do that . . .” And on and on and on. Peter is no doubt being self-congratulatory in suggesting he might forgive seven times.

Jesus’ response takes Peter—and all of us—from a culture of score-keeping, of reciprocity, of revenge and vengeance—to the counter-cultural gospel culture of compassion and mercy—of unmerited grace. “Not seven times, but seventy-seven—or seventy times seven—times,” depending on translation.

To illustrate, Jesus gives us another of his mind-blowing parables. A king wishes to settle accounts. The first slave to come before him owes him a stupendous amount, ten thousand talents, worth approximately 150,000 years of wages! One commentator suggests it’s the value of a day’s wage for 100,000,000.¹ It’s inconceivable. Even Bill Gates and Warren Buffett would have trouble repaying such a debt. Yet the king has mercy and forgives the debt. Yet that same slave comes across a fellow slave who owes him 100 denarii, a hundred days of wages. It’s a lot of money, but it’s not as much as many of us owe on our cars or our houses. Like the first slave, the second begs for mercy, but that first slave refuses. Instead, he throws him in prison.

How is it that those who live under the grace, the mercy, and the forgiveness of God are not able to forgive others?

Forgiveness is at the heart of Christian community. Forgiveness is the heart of life together, of ongoing relationship, whether between a husband and wife, a parent and child, extended family, neighbors, work associates, or even casual friends.

But Jesus is not talking about “cheap” forgiveness, of blithely saying, “forgive and forget,” in a way that fails to take seriously the wrong that has happened.

Last Sunday we heard Jesus tell us in our gospel that the wrongdoer must be held accountable, that the one who is wronged does not sweep the wrong doing under the rug and move on, but rather the wronged party goes to the offending party. But the motive is not revenge; rather the motive is reconciliation, so much so that the onus is on the one wronged to keep at it, to exhaust all appropriate means, to work toward reconciliation.

N.T. Wright, author of *Matthew for Everyone*, puts it this way:

The key thing . . . is not that one should therefore swallow all resentment and ‘forgive and forget’ as though nothing had happened. The key thing is that one should never, ever give up making forgiveness and reconciliation one’s goal. If confrontation has to happen, as it often does, it must always be with forgiveness in mind, never revenge.²

It is helpful, I think, to keep in mind that forgiveness and reconciliation is sometimes an unfolding process that plays out over a period of time, sometimes a very long period of time. We remember the story of Joseph and his brothers. At the very least a decade or so has passed between the time Joseph is sold into slavery and the story in our First Lesson, and much has happened in the meantime. Patience, as well as persistence, is key. When we set our minds on forgiveness and reconciliation, we’re in it for the long haul.

So we come back to the signboard in front of Glen Avon: “70 Times 7 Meets 9-11.” What do our scriptures have to say to us today, on this tenth anniversary of 9/11?

It’s been said that the *events* of 9/11 have changed the world forever. It might also be said that *our response* to 9/11 has changed the world forever.

The events of the past ten years cannot be undone. However, we might examine the past ten years in light of the contrasting cultures of revenge and vengeance, on the one hand, with forgiveness and reconciliation, on the other, being mindful that the latter also insists on holding the wrongdoer accountable.

Perhaps we cannot control what others do to us. We can, however, control, how we respond. Here is where our texts offer us a way forward.

One final comment. It’s crucial that we remember the difference between a parable and an allegory. A parable has one point; an allegory is constructed as a series of comparisons: this means this, and this means this . . . Our gospel story is a parable about the amazing generosity and forgiveness of God. Our psalm antiphon is helpful: “Lord, you are full of compassion and mercy.” The Good News of our texts is that we who live under the compassion and mercy of God are invited to live it out in all we say and do.

¹Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 217.

²N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part Two* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 39.