

Sermon: Brook 10am
Text: Matthew 18:21-35

September 11th 2011
Trinity 12

On December 8th, 1941 President Roosevelt addressed the Congress of the United States with what has come to be known as his "Day of Infamy" speech. It followed Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and led to a declaration of war against Japan and officially brought the United States into WWII. He intended to make a strong emotional impact, appealing to the anger felt by the American people. He drew a sharp contrast between the "righteous might" of the American people and the aggressive and deceitful nature of the Japanese regime. It was intended not merely as a personal response by the president, but as a statement on behalf of the entire American people in the face of a great collective trauma. In proclaiming the indelibility of the attack and expressing outrage at its "dastardly" nature, the

speech worked to crystallize and channel the response of the nation into a collective response and resolve. Sixty years later, the continuing resonance of the Infamy Speech was demonstrated by President Bush following the attack on the Twin Towers which many commentators compared with Pearl Harbor in terms of its impact and deadliness. When 9/11 happened, the comparisons to 12/7 were inevitable. Sixty years later, the shock, loss and outrage were similar, but the course of action was less clear against stateless, ill-defined enemies who prefer killing civilians to battling armies. As Pearl Harbor called a generation of Americans to arms and decisive victory, 9/11 brought another generation to vigilance and uncertainty. This uncertainty and negativity changed the political and social character of the United States that in turn has affected the entire world.

September 11, 2001 was a date that challenged the grace of forgiveness that we who claim to be Christians have been told by our Lord to offer, even to our enemies. The world was seething with hatred, bitterness and anger, and with various groups and individuals wanting to cause harm to others, or retaliate – often done in the name of God. But surely our God is a God of love, not a God of hatred- And that God of love commanded us to do what often feels impossible. We ask “how can we forgive such an outrageous act?”

Did it ever strike you as odd that to illustrate the importance of forgiveness Jesus used a parable about financial debt? Non conformist churches use debt and debtor in the Lord’s Prayer, whereas we say trespass or sin which is more along the lines of forgiving a wrongdoing, or a hurtful action; not

excusing someone from repaying money they might owe us.

But we know Jesus never said or did anything without good reason, and his story about the King and the chap who owed him money makes sense if you look a bit deeper into just exactly who it was that owed the money and how much. We need to get ‘inside’ the story, identify with the characters, and observe the generosity of the lender.

Growing up in basically Christian households most of us will have had it drummed into us that we are supposed to forgive; and we all recognize the positive value in letting go of cherished hurts, but often find it impossible to do so – mainly because they are just that, *cherished*. Whatever the wrong that we may have experienced, as imperfect humans we do love to hang on to those hurts and

being told we have to forgive and let it go piles on the misery. That's why the two sections of our gospel reading are so helpful. The first, is the brief exchange with Peter about the extent and nature of forgiveness – 70 X 7, is Jesus' way of saying that forgiveness is not a commodity to be reckoned on a calculator. The language of numbers is inappropriate and it's not really about what one owes but about generous forgiveness - to illustrate this he told a parable using an absurd sum of money to emphasize the indebtedness of the first servant to the king. And as always, Jesus does not give answers but invites us to enter into the God like way of seeing things and leaves it to us to decide what we are going to do.

A king forgives a large debt...now this is where we have to be pretty clear that this bloke was not in debt because of a loan, but because he must have

been using his position to systematically rob the king blind. He was a petty official who used his position to steal. Lets face it, why would the king have have loaned one of his slaves the equivalent of several billion pounds, because that's the equivalent today of the sum mentioned. But when he uncovered this chaps dishonesty he forgave him. When this debtor in turn refuses to let a friend off the hook to whom he has loaned a very paltry amount the king gets wind of it and punishes him harshly.

It is not necessary to turn this into a good guy bad guy story. It may look like it but this is not a judgement parable but a Kingdom of God parable. The lesson, like so much else in the life of faith, is a paradox. God cannot forgive us until we forgive others. So what is forgiveness? Well, it's lots of things. It's treating someone better than they

deserve – that official did not deserve to be forgiven. It's doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. It's giving without limit. The huge sum forgiven tells us that our forgiveness must know no bounds. I'm not talking about multiple wrongs, but often only one wrong that we have forgiven, but when reminded of it must forgive again- and again.

Forgiveness is offered so that we can get along with each other. God forgives us because He is concerned with us as people. He wants to restore the fellowship between himself and ourselves – but – fellowship is costly. We believe that God forgave, and continues to forgive, mankind through the death of Jesus. The generous gift of his life showed us the boundless love of God.

We often think of forgiveness as something that someone who has wronged us must *ask of us*. Not so, we need to take the initiative and in our hearts forgive the person who has wronged us before the hatred eats away at our ability to forgive at all. It's not easy, but God is there to help. We can do it by offering the person or the wrong to God, and try not sit in judgement. When we withhold forgiveness we remain the victim. When we offer forgiveness we are doing it only for our own well being, because it allows us to move beyond the pain, the resentment and the anger. We always have a choice- to forgive or not to forgive, but when we choose to forgive we make the choice that heals. I'm pretty sure most of us will have experienced at some time or other, the great release that comes from forgiving – letting go. It has nothing to do with sentiment, it is a powerful

act of will. As nations we have failed miserably, as communities we still have a long way to go.

Individuals personally affected by the tragedy of 9/11 may find it hard to forgive, because they don't know 'who' to blame or to forgive. A woman who survived the London underground bombings was asked if she could forgive the perpetrators and she said: "I would hope that I could, but I don't know whom to forgive. Until I am able to see the face of such hatred, I do not know how deep I must dig in my spirit of find forgiveness". Within each of us there is a spirit of forgiveness, and it is the part that tells us we are made in God's image and must do as he commands. Whether it be a small personal hurt or a huge and unimaginable tragedy we must look to be like him and forgive.

Ten years on, we are inundated with countless reflections and memories, but I found David Rieff's article in Harpers Magazine rather helpful. He said: *"To remember may not just mean to grieve; it may also mean to harbor a vision of securing justice or vengeance, long after it is time to put the guns away ... We would do well to consider the possibility that if our societies were to expend even a fraction of the energy on forgetting, that we now do on remembering ... then the peace that must come eventually might actually come sooner."*

Until we find in ourselves the capacity to forgive, we continue to be linked to the cause of our anger and our unforgiving emotions. Only as we forgive are we able to move on and become the more Christ-like person that God has called us all to be.