

Today is the anniversary of 9/11. September 11, 2001. I've been thinking and praying for at least a month now about that actual event which scarred our nation's history and changed the very nature of our identity and our very way of life. I've been thinking and praying about the lives taken, the families they left behind and the changes in the ways we now "do business" here in the United States.

Numerous media articles and presentations have reminded us all of this tragic event. I've also been thinking and praying; been wrestling actually, with the various ways in which to present this sermon to you today. I imagine clergy all around the United States have also struggled with selecting an approach to the remembrance of this atrocity. Reviewing the event can only be helpful toward educating a generation of children who do not remember that fateful day. Reliving the event cannot be helpful. And I do not believe it helpful at all to stir up emotions of hate, revenge and fear for any of us.

So I look to our Lectionary, especially the Gospel appointed for today. Here, I find, as I usually do, the answers I need to speak to you all in order to find meaning and perhaps some redemption, some transformation to help heal us and to learn how to get on with our lives. Not to forget, but to heal. And I understand that forgiveness is a major component, a major step toward healing.

Jesus continues to instruct his people how to live in community. It is not easy. It is not easy at all; especially when some members of the community behave badly. In today's Gospel we listen to the story of the wicked tenant. It is what has been called, a prickly story. It does not have a happy ending, but it does teach us things we need to hear, simply, "Love your enemies" (Mt 5.44). Somehow and for some weird reason, I think the victims of 9/11 might be wondering why we didn't think of that before we went trundling off to war, and, with prejudice and fear against Muslims in general. Don't get me wrong: It is a normal, maybe even a healthy, first gut level reaction to seek protection and even revenge. But as hard as it might be for all of us, it is really so very complicated, it is downright simple.

The grace of God is not about magic. It is certainly not about anything easy. It's about something simple, that God can be trusted, but not taken for granted. We might say that it's complicatedly simple.

Peter seemed not so sure. He, like a lot of his type today, was not into ambiguity. He was like members of our society who want to make choices that don't have much if any wiggle room, or need clear to follow the letter of our laws and canons, which, sadly, don't always cover each and every situation in spirit.

He didn't appear to have anything against forgiving; you might say that he just wanted to be careful not to overdo it. He didn't ask Jesus whether to forgive,

he simply wanted to know how much. “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (Mt 18.21)

Jesus’ answer of 490 probably pleased him immensely, not because it surely overtaxed his capacities, but because Jesus gave him the kind of left-brain answer he really cherished. Whether Peter would climb all over his brother on number 491 or whether Jesus put any limit at all on redemption is not mentioned. Neither is there any reference to what must surely have been Peter’s immense pleasure over Jesus restoring him to the fellowship after a mere three betrayals — and then actually giving him his own redemption with those keys to the Kingdom.

Forgiveness never comes easy — either giving it or, especially, receiving it. The sin against the Holy Spirit, the so-called unforgivable sin, is precisely that, not because God won’t forgive us, but because we won’t allow ourselves to be forgiven, we won’t accept the reconciliation into God’s graces that forgiveness allows. By God’s creation of us, we are free to choose the gift of Holy Spirit. And that means we are free to refuse it, as well.

Forgiveness, of course, never means to forget, nor does it mean there aren’t consequences or punishments. What it does mean is that the connections are opened and kept open, the channels of communication are freed up, the vision, the eye-to-eye remains clear, the arms are open for embrace, the keys of the Kingdom are yours to use as you will.

And forgiveness never means there are no risks. For the same painful exchange that created the need in the first place might well happen again. But, as well, the lack of forgiveness does not mean that there there is no love or no grace, just that the love, the grace cannot break through to start its healing nourishment unless one gets one's act together and gets a life.

We-you and me- are the way God forgives. It is through you and me that God's grace is known. It is when we — in the words of our baptismal covenant — “seek and serve Christ” in other people—even ones who behave badly -- that grace can explode into our lives, and we are overwhelmed by it.

But then, if we just can't buy all this, there's always Oscar Wilde who said, “Always forgive your enemies, nothing annoys them so much.” Whether or not he'd read St Paul, he was coming from the same place. Only Paul, that scoundrel, must have been beyond simply annoying somebody when he wrote in the letter to the Romans (12:20), “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head”

To be forgiven is to be found. And to forgive is also to be found. It is to be found by the grace of God. Like C S Lewis discovered, it is to be “surprised by joy.” So, I believe that in order to seek any meaning, any redemption from those horrible events that we remember from 10 years ago, we must pray not only to forgive those that hurt us, but also to ask for forgiveness of our own sins, whether

corporate or personal. Christianity requires it of us. Jesus did no less for those who put him up on that tree. The Good News in all of this is that by his death and resurrection we are offered God's true peace both in the world and in our own lives.