

Another Time and Place ~ September 14, 2008

Genesis 50:15-21; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35; Psalm 103:1-13

I started mulling over this sermon Thursday morning as I sat in this sanctuary reflecting on the September 11th of seven years ago. It was another time and I was in another place when the haunting events of that day happened.

I remember clearly where I was, as most all of us do, and what I was doing as I heard the voices of disbelief coming over the radio. I remember the people gathered around a television in the customer waiting area where I had taken my car for service. I remember calling my daughters to find out where they were. I remember the people of the church I was serving and their puzzled looks and questions. What had happened was difficult to grasp and, then, even more difficult to understand. But that was another time and another place.

Our scripture readings call to us from another time and place. But the truth the words point to is timeless for people of faith. Two of our readings point toward forgiveness and the other reminds us that God will be the final judge of each of us no matter what our nationality or faith. That reading from Romans also points to forgiveness, in its own way, by reminding us that God is our final judge and that we are not to sit in judgment of one another.

Often, when we refuse to forgive another person we refuse to take him or her off the hook of our judgment. We like to see someone dangle and twist a little. This is because we are human. We think that if we have been injured in one way or another we want to make the one who hurt us suffer. Usually the other person goes on with his or her life not too troubled by whatever has occurred. If we choose to begin to live more Christ-like lives we will learn how to cut others some slack and learn to accept them where they are in life with all their little flaws and we will set aside all thoughts of trying to even the score. We can hope they will do the same for us. Some will, some won't.

Joseph did. He set aside all the feelings he must have felt when his brothers disposed of him by selling him to slave traders. Joseph, as we remember from the story in Genesis, made the most of his stay in Egypt and rose to a position of great power. When his brothers came asking for food during a time of famine, he granted all they wanted. There were some little twists and turns to the story but they went back to their land with food. In the scene from this morning's reading, we see a great act of forgiveness on his part. His brothers were fearful that he would carry a grudge and try to punish them for past wrongs. He surprised them by refusing to do so.

Jesus, brought up in the Jewish tradition, must have been very familiar with the stories of the Hebrew Bible. He also had a strong sense of the forgiving nature of God and understood that because God forgives God's creatures, we are expected to extend that forgiveness to all others we encounter.

So when Peter approached him to ask how many times he had to forgive someone who continued wronging him, Jesus told him that he had to forgive that person an infinite number of times. So many times that he would lose count, I am sure, and make forgiveness a way of life. Very often when we decide to follow a practice faithfully it

simply becomes a part of our lives before we even notice it. This can happen with good practices and with those that are not as good.

Jesus went a bit further in telling the story about the man who forgave another who owed him money. In his kindness he let the fellow off the hook. When he learned that the man had refused to do the same for a fellow servant, he was enraged and he had him locked up until the forgiven debt had been repaid. The extension of forgiveness is required of us if we are to practice what we believe or claim to believe.

I know this is difficult. But to decide not to practice the fine art of forgiveness means that we carry within ourselves huge burdens of anger and thoughts of vengeance. Every time we see someone or even hear their name mentioned something gurgles deep within us and we entertain less than kind thoughts. We review all that has happened and think of how we will get back at the person and turn things to our advantage. We need to be right. I wonder how much time, good time, which we have on this earth in limited supply, is wasted on all our plotting and planning different ways of “getting someone.” Can you imagine how our corner of the world might change if all that energy and time would be spent in making things better for all? I have known people who carry grudges for years over things that make no difference in the long run.

Jesus was telling those closest to him and us that there is much work to be done in bringing about the kingdom of God on earth. There is no time to be spent in trying to undermine those we see as our enemies.

Thomas Merton wrote, “Do not be too quick to assume your enemy is a savage just because he is your enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy because he thinks you are a savage. Or perhaps he is afraid of you because he feels that you are afraid of him. And perhaps if he believed you are capable of loving him he would no longer be your enemy.” Love is shown when we are able to let go of hurtful things that have happened, mend a few fences and move on with life holding a common cause before us.

Some think that we reveal a weakness within ourselves when we choose to forgive someone. Someone once said, that it is “the weak who cannot forgive.” That is true; it takes a strong person to truly forgive another and to let sleeping dogs lie where they may.

While the words of our teachings come to us from long ago and far away they have great meaning for those of us who want to make our world a little better for those who will follow us. We teach others by the example of the lives we lead. If we want things to become better and if we want to learn how to work together for any common good goal, we need to set aside all the small, petty stuff that threatens to separate us, gain a better understanding that all people do not think alike and are not made in the same mold. We have to understand that things happen; people step knowingly or unknowingly on the toes of others. We hurt one another by thoughtless words or actions. If we have been hurt, and we all have, we need to step back a bit, allow ourselves some space for reflection, realize that it is not the end of the world and that all people are precious in the eyes of God and created in God’s image and then move forward. There is little time for us on this earth to do anything else.

-- Amen