



The Reverend Dr. Philip C. Linder

September 11, 2011

Pentecost 13 Year A

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

On September 7, 2001, United Airlines copilot, Cholene Espinoza flew the approach over Manhattan and past the World Trade Towers. The next day she received her schedule to fly from New York to San Francisco on the morning of September 11th. And at the last minute she was rescheduled from United Airlines 93 and shared these words about her life narrowly being spared: *The enormity of the what ifs and the loss of humanity were overwhelming. Why me? It was deeper than survivor's guilt. For me it was time to start thinking about the fragility and preciousness of life, define who I was, know what I really wanted, and ensure I was living to the fullest my own life and not someone's else's.* Cholene, like so many affected, had many issues with which to deal and among them for most was finding forgiveness.

Today is of course the tenth anniversary of 9-11. We can all remember where we were the day that our lives as Americans changed forever because of this evil terrorist attack. I saw the first plane hit one of the World Trade Center Towers on NBC's Today Show as I was heading out the door to the cathedral. As I left the house the news reports stated it was perhaps a small plane crash, however by the time I settled into my office it was quite clear that our nation was under attack. America and indeed the world would never be the same; many events were to follow, thousands of lives were mourned and changed forever, and in the midst of it all we as a Christian people struggled to understand. You see the problem of evil—theodicy as it is called—is in fact

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not easily understood. We could focus upon why people commit evil acts...why God allows such bad things to happen, or perhaps we could look anew at what it means to be called as a Christian to forgive.

Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Jesus' answer of 77 times to the very human question of Peter about forgiveness is one of the most powerful statements of Christ within the gospels. There is no limit to how often you and I are called to forgive another when we choose to follow Jesus Christ. For most of us on September 11, 2001 "forgiveness" of the terrorists was nowhere to be found on our lips or in our hearts. And each one of us has both people and events within our personal lives where we as well are called by Jesus and our Christian faith to forgive—and we are well aware of how challenging this can be.

I remember meeting once with a couple in Atlanta with whom I was doing some very preliminary marriage counseling. There was a crisis in the marriage where one of the parties had greatly harmed the other emotionally on several levels. This was our second meeting, when I asked the spouse who had been wronged, *Do you see the possibility of one day, after a lot of work, being able to forgive your husband?* After a long pause, she replied, *I may be able to forgive him, but I will never forget what he did.* And therein was the great problem and dilemma.

Forgiveness, as painful and difficult as this may be, requires a forgetting as well. There must be a loss of memory, if you will. Forgiveness is the grace that we offer the other person that claims a

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moving forward for us from that point in a brand new way. The paradox is the fact that we hold it out to the other, yet we are the ones who benefit greatly through this forgiving grace. It was Mark Twain who wrote, *Forgiveness is the grace that the violet sheds upon the heel that has just crushed it.*

The key to this kind of forgiveness is behind Jesus' parable of the king, his slaves, and forgiveness. The king forgives and forgets the debt of the slave, who in turn though does not forgive and forget the debt of his fellow slave. *Should you have not had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?* There it is, the divine forgiveness and forgetting to which God calls you. Forgiveness as divine forgetting is not an easy path to walk down, yet it is only in that place that true reconciliation occurs.

Today, what hurt by another toward you do you continue to cling to? Have you said to God I have forgiven him...I have forgiven her...but yet, you have not forgotten? If you are old enough, you can recall with me your early school days when it was your turn at the end of the day to wash the chalkboards. Do you remember how you wanted to wipe that slate so clean that none of the former things would show through? Imagine forgiveness in that way—forgiveness of the heart and mind. In the name of God who is forgiveness. Amen.

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