

September 11, 2011: WELCOME, STRANGER!

Exodus 14:19-31; Romans 14:1-12

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As kids, when we complained to our mother about being picked on by one of the others, her standard question was, “What did you do to deserve it?” That’s a terrible question to ask a kid, but it arose out of the realities of living with four children under the age of six, aware that there is more than one side to any story. Her question interfered with my sermon prep this week, because the lectionary passages these last couple of weeks have been about forgiveness, surely the worst imaginable passages, as we move toward the 10th anniversary of 9/11/01. One scholar, *not* in anticipation of *this* date, but only looking at the lectionary trajectory, comments that these texts are often interpreted as, “Love the sinner, not the sin.” Not very practical help, especially as we reflect on the events of ten years ago.

Today, the apostle Paul offers a how-to plan for preventing conflict. His plan is uncomfortably radical, especially as we try to negotiate today’s remembrances with some integrity of faith. Paul contends that it’s not about how *right* you are in disagreements; it’s about your *spirit* toward people with whom you disagree. His program requires a radical practice of grace, a life lived beyond judgment and beyond justice—“life that loves real and *enduring* enemies.”¹ Unfortunately, Paul’s audience is a split congregation just trying to survive in a world where they are actively and mortally persecuted, by the government and co-religionists. Rather than getting group and personal energy from opposition to enemies, Paul warns them that Christians are not defined by “who we’re *against*.” We follow the One who told us to *love* enemies.

Which doesn’t mean we can’t have strong opinions. Or actually *be* right. The point is for Christians to avoid the need to be “right” for our own sake, our own good, or even the justice for which we work. Why? *Because* “in life and in death, we belong to God.” And so do our enemies. What’s at stake in our faith isn’t a private walk with a personal Jesus. What is at stake is transformation—personal and communal and societal and global.

Paul’s prescription for preventing conflict is simple. It’s not differences of opinion that cause conflicts, he says, it’s differences of power. Therefore, welcome the *weak*, he says, the people you don’t agree with. “Welcome” as in go out of your way to help strangers find a place, be as present to those with whom you disagree as you are to the people you agree with. Then, to reduce conflict (because there will be some), don’t adopt rigid, polarized positions. Avoid doing things and forming opinions that cause you to lose respect for others. Try the “third way.” When my home church began to raise funds for a building project, there were some who felt the church should spend its resources on mission, not on themselves. Rather than polarizing into two camps—the New Building group and the Compassionate Mission group—session adopted a Third Way. Session decided that for every \$3 that went into the building fund, \$1 would go into an endowment fund for mission. Two ministries were designated and, years later, those ministries were where I entered church life in earnest. This was conflict resolution that *formed* community and *transformed* lives. Nobody was “right,” but God’s kingdom was promoted.

¹ *Feasting on the Word*, Romans 14:1-12, William Greenway (P. 64)

Along the same lines, United Farm Workers Union organizer, Cesar Chavez, seems to paraphrase Paul when he says, “When we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of [people] we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we really find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of [human-ness] is to sacrifice ourselves for others in totally nonviolent struggle for justice.”²

Liturgical Gesture: Remembrance of September 11, 2001
Springwater Presbyterian Church

Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. It means taking what happened seriously and not minimizing it; drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our entire existence. It involves trying to understand the perpetrators and so have empathy, to try to stand in their shoes and appreciate the sort of pressures and influences that might have conditioned them. . . . By forgiveness we are saying here is a chance to make a new beginning.

Desmond Tutu

Litany adapted from a prayer published by the National Council of Churches, by Rev. Eileen W. Lindner and Rev. Marcel A. Welty

One: We place these ribbons today in remembrance. When we remember the stockbrokers, office workers, maintenance workers, bystanders, window-washers and all the others who worked together so valiantly to help each other, we can say together,

All: We remember great courage.

One: When we recall the firefighters who rushed upstairs as most everyone else was racing out, we can say together,

All: We remember selfless service.

One: When we recall the police officers who stood to protect and defend the people and performed their duties until the towers came crashing down on top of them, we can say together,

All: We remember selfless sacrifice for the safety of others.

One: When we recall the thousands of workers, women and men and, old and young, single and married, American-born and those born in countries around the world who did not escape the buildings, we can say together,

² Quoted in *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*, by Shane Claiborne et al, p. 434, September 8.

All: We remember the loss of human life.

One: When we recall the people who stood in line at the nation's blood banks to make living donations from their very bodies, we can say together,

All: We give thanks for those who live on to pass on life and love.

We place these ribbons today in penitence, recognizing that we have not done enough to address the sources of anger, hate, dehumanization, rage and indignation that lead to acts of violence. In our sadness, horror and shock we acknowledge that our own fears can turn murderous as we seek revenge. **Repentance means to turn away from wrong deeds. Repentance means choosing instead deeds which require moral restraint, and are more beneficial to all persons who suffer.**

We place these ribbons today in prayer for a better world for our children and our children's children, and all the children of God. We recall with joy the unity we felt in the outpouring of help, kindness, thoughtful words and deeds from at home and around the world.

All: We must hold firmly to our unity, borne forward now not of tragedy but of loving kindness.

God of the ages, before your eyes all empires rise and fall yet you are changeless. Be near us in this age of terror and in these moments of remembrance. Uphold those who work and watch and wait and weep and love. By your Spirit give rise in us broad sympathy for all the peoples of your earth. Strengthen us to comfort those who mourn and work in large ways and small for those things that make for peace. Bless the people and leaders of this nation and all nations so that warfare, like slavery before it, may become only a historic memory. We pray in the strong name of the Prince of Peace. Amen.

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