

## **Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: September 13, 2020**

### **The Sermon: Rev. Carol Ruthven**

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy Name.” Psalm 103:1  
Friday this week marked the solemn occasion of the nineteenth anniversary of that fateful day on September 11, when the Twin Towers in New York City, the Pentagon, and a plane flying over Pennsylvania were attacked by terrorists and thousands of innocent men, women and children died. This week the number of people in the United States who have died of COVID-19 is more than 190,000 and 1,000 people are dying daily. These events have forever changed our nation and world. This loss of innocent lives is hard for us to comprehend. We ask ourselves why has this happened and how can we as Christians respond.

There are no simple or easy answers that explain why these things have happened. I do not have good answers for these difficult questions. Perhaps these questions can never be answered fully or satisfactorily. When I do not understand things, I turn to my faith in God. I have found comfort in a reflection by Ruth Graham, the wife of Christian Evangelical leader, The Rev. Billy Graham. She said:

I lay my “why?”  
Before Your cross  
In worship kneeling,  
My mind beyond all hope,  
My heart beyond all feeling,  
And worshipping,  
Realize that I  
In knowing You,  
Don’t need a “Why?”

I often return to these words of wisdom. There are many questions that ask why that we can never answer. Perhaps the best and most faithful thing we can do is to lay those questions at the foot of Christ’s cross. If we know Jesus Christ and believe in resurrection after death, that is enough. We can also be comforted by the words of the Psalmist, who reminds us that God redeems those who have died and crowns them with mercy and loving-kindness (Ps. 103:4).

Paul told the Christians in Rome that “...each of us will be accountable to God” (Rom. 14:12). He said, “...we will all stand before the judgment seat of God” (Rom. 14:10b). It is not for us to judge the actions of others; God alone does that. If we know that God will be the

ultimate judge of people who do evil things, we can let go of any anger or hatred we may hold toward them. If we are truly faithful, we can even forgive those who have done evil things. We may not forget what they have done; but we can choose to forgive them.

Sometimes it is out of our greatest pain and loss that we develop the deepest compassion for others. Let me tell you about the non-profit project Beyond the 11th that was created by two American women whose husbands were killed in the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Susan Retik was 7-months pregnant with her third child and Patti Quigley was 8-months pregnant with her second child when their husbands died in the 9/11 attacks. Their profound grief opened the gates of compassion for women, who were widows in Afghanistan. Without a husband, Afghan widows lose all their rights. They can be evicted from their homes, have their children taken away by in-laws, or be forced to live in the streets where they would be homeless and not safe. The project that Susan and Patti created teaches Afghan widows skills that allow them to thrive, be financially independent and help their children. Since it was created in 2003, this project has helped thousands of widows and their children. It is a compelling example of what can happen when we let go of anger and hatred and respond with compassion and love.

We have heard many stories from across America and in countries around the world of people grieving the loss of so many people who have died in the COVID pandemic. We have also heard one story after another of compassionate people, who have let go of the anger and frustration with the pandemic and focused instead on providing compassionate care in hospitals and nursing homes, preparing and delivering meals to healthcare workers and emergency responders, donating to food banks, donating supplies of personal protective equipment, repurposing factory production lines to make ventilators and hand sanitizer, sewing masks, and volunteering their time and talents to help in many other ways.

When evil things happen, we can be angry and quick to judge and condemn others. When we do this, we only hurt ourselves because we are burdened by the heavy weight of our anger and judgmental attitudes. When we are willing to forgive others, we are freed to move on and discover how our lives and the lives of others can be made better, if we respond with forgiveness, compassion, and love.

Jesus understood the vital importance of forgiveness and he talked a lot about it. Peter, who was always so eager as a disciple, asked Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" As many as seven times?" (Matt. 18:21) Peter

always seemed to ask the questions that we would like to ask. Perhaps Peter was trying to impress Jesus by saying that he would be willing to forgive someone up to seven times because the number seven is a holy number for Jewish people. Or perhaps Peter knew about the ancient rabbinic tradition that a person should forgive another person who has sinned against him as many as four times.

I imagine Peter was stunned when Jesus responded by saying, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” It is unclear whether the Greek text means “seventy-seven times” or “seventy times seven times.” Either way, it is a huge number. Jesus was making the point that the number of times we must forgive is much greater than we can ever imagine. Peter was looking for a simple rule to follow. It was as if Peter was holding his hands apart a few inches and saying: “This much, Lord? Should I forgive this much?” And Jesus replied, “No, much more than that” as he stretched out his arms as wide as he could.

What did Jesus mean? The words of the Psalmist help us. They are words that Jesus would have known well. The Psalmist said: “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness....For as the heavens are high above the earth, so is his mercy great upon those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us.” Jesus was saying that we should forgive with the same mercy and compassion as God. He was saying “...there is no limit to forgiveness, that forgiving those who sin against us is not something we ever get done with but something that goes on forever; that is it not a favor we bestow seven times and withhold the eighth, but a way of life that never ends.”

This is probably why Jesus included forgiveness in his prayer that we pray every Sunday. We ask God to forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Forgiveness is so important that it should be an integral part of our daily lives. Real forgiveness is about pure, unadulterated grace. God has forgiven all of our sins. If that is not pure, unadulterated grace, I do not know what is. I know that I have sinned in multiple ways through what I have done and what I have left undone over my lifetime and I will no doubt sin in many ways in the future.

God has forgiven us our sins because he wants to remain in relationship with us and wants us to be free to live in relationships of love and compassion with others. As faithful Christians, we are called to forgive ourselves and others for the sins we commit. We must do this, over and over again, as long as it takes to offer absolute, unconditional forgiveness. When

we do this, we can build relationships of compassion, love, and trust and make the world a better place for all of us. Amen.