

**Proper 19A
Matthew 18:21-35
September 11, 2011**

Forgive and forget. It's a famous saying, a platitude, a cliché. We all know it. Forgive and forget. Forgive and forget.

Thing is, if you actually go to look up this quote, it isn't "Forgive and forget" at all. The actual quote, as said by Cervantes and also by Shakespeare, is Forget. And Forgive. Forget and forgive. Forget and forgive.

Which turns the whole business on its head, doesn't it? If we forgive and forget, then we do all our apologies, kiss and make up, then try to act as if it never happened. We try to erase the offense and move on. But to forget and forgive implies something different. It means that we can't actually forgive until we have first forgotten – forgotten the hurt, the shame, the wrong, the injustice, the suffering, the humiliation, the sorrow, the loss.

Forget. And then forgive.

It seems strange to talk about forgetting on this day, of all days. This is September 11, 2011. It is the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington DC, the tenth anniversary of the plane that was crashed in Pennsylvania, and prevented from shattering the Capitol building, or the White House ... whichever was its target. This is the day we remember. We remember all of it. The news has been full of it. My alarm goes off in the morning and they are talking about it on NPR, in those same soothing voices that talked me through it in the days and weeks after 9/11. I turn on the television, and then I have to turn it off again, because it brings it all back, just like a decade has never passed, and I can't stand it that I still cry as hard as I did ten years ago.

I have not forgotten. I remember. I remember so much, and I imagine you do too.

I remember where I was. I was at my desk at Ascension Episcopal Church, 20 miles outside of Washington. I remember one of the parishioners was going to take Sunday's deposit to the bank, and he told me a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. I remember trying to get our pathetic church television – used only for showing videos – to pick up a station, and watching the flaming buildings through the fuzz and static. I remember the phone call ... did we know the Pentagon was now on fire? I remember phoning my rector, who was headed to the National Cathedral for a meeting. I remember saying, "Turn around and get out of DC -- NOW." I remember actually reaching my nephew who lived in Manhattan, and finding out he was all right. I remember painting a banner to hang in front of the church because we would hold a prayer vigil that night. I remember learning that the schools were finally going to dismiss the students that had been held in lockdown, and driving for two hours through the gridlocked Maryland suburbs, with jet fighters roaring overhead, to reach a friend's house, where my children were safe, and Wendell came home and he was safe, and we were all together at last, safe, safe in our own house, which was NOT burning, or falling down. And that in itself seemed like a miracle.

I remember later, all the things we learned about that day. The heroism of first responders who went UP into those towers as all the people who could were racing down. The man who stayed with his wheelchair-bound co-worker in the towers, who refused to leave him alone, who died by his side. The passengers on Flight 93 over Pennsylvania, who decided to take on the hijackers rather than let that plane reach its target. The soldiers and civilians working at the Pentagon who kept going back into the raging fires, running on top of the burning aircraft, even, to pull people out. All the people in the Trade Center who were trapped above the flames of the impact, who couldn't get out, who called and called and called the people they loved, leaving messages on answering machines all over the world – "I love you."

I remember the entire Congress standing on the steps of the Capitol, arm in arm, singing "God Bless America." I remember people lined up around the block at blood banks across the nation to give blood. I remember the outpouring of love and support from people all around the world, the goodwill that flowed toward us from so many nations. I remember that rescue and response teams from all over the

United States came to New York and Washington to sift through the rubble for remains, to work putting out the Trade Center fires that smoldered for three months. I remember that people in New York City stopped cursing each other out at the drop of a hat, and that in Washington, drivers actually started yielding to pedestrians in crosswalks. I remember people putting aside old grievances, renewing old relationships, realizing that life is short, and that so much of our resentment and anger and irritations seem small and petty in the face of such enormous tragedy, grief and heroism.

I remember how much we forgot. We forgot that we were Democrats or Republicans, and remembered we were all Americans. We forgot to be too busy or too frightened to give blood. We forgot to put ourselves first. We forgot to be angry with people who cut in front of us or got in our way or took too much time at the checkout line. We forgot our grudges. We forgot that idea that we were actually in control of our lives, our schedules, or our destinies. We forgot that we were too stressed or too bored to pray, or to go to church, or to turn to God.

Do you remember? Do you remember how much we forgot? We forgot so many things – things that divide us from one another, things that keep us feeling righteous and put upon, things that we thought were so very, very important ... until we realized they weren't. We forgot so much. It didn't matter. It wasn't important. We forgot it. And we forgave. For a few days there, maybe even a few weeks, it seemed like 9/11 – the Day When Everything Changed – had really changed us all for the better, that there was a new sense of unity and love and charity and tolerance. We forgot and then we forgave. We forgave so much.

Until we forgot. Again.

Until we forgot the sense of fragility and unity we felt on 9/11 and turned our fear and anger outward ... first, in two separate wars, and then in bitter debate and diatribe over those wars here at home. We forgot that we were Americans first, and Democrats or Republicans after, and we have descended into a new low in political discourse – a low that does not allow anyone to hold an opposing opinion without being tarred as a traitor, or a socialist, or a fascist, or a nut job. We forgot that life is a crap shoot, that tragedy can strike any time -- like a

speeding jet plane on a perfect September day -- into the structures of our lives. We forgot that we are not immortal, not invincible, not one of us the most important person on the planet. We forgot that we are all in this together. We forgot to turn to one another. We forgot to turn to prayer. We forgot to turn to God.

Peter asks Jesus in this morning's gospel, "How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" And Jesus ... Jesus who knows how quickly we forget, how quickly our good intentions are shattered, how quickly we fall back into all our old hurtful, selfish, harsh and frustrated ways, how quickly we will offend our brothers and sisters again and again and again, even when we don't want to or plan to or mean to ... Jesus says no. "Not seven times. But seventy-seven times." That's how we should forgive. Over. And over. And over again.

Because that's how God forgives. Each one of us. All of us. We might forget our fragility, our unity, our dependence upon other human beings, and our reliance on the unlimited grace and mercy of a loving God. But God does not forget. God looks at us and sees us the way we were on that horrific day ten years ago – frightened, broken-hearted, braver than we would ever have imagined we could be, shattered by the reality of evil, united in our common frailty, our common mortality, our common humanity, loving – in tender, gentle solidarity with one another and everyone we met.

God sees us for the people we really are, when we are really our very best selves. And God does not forget who we really are. Even when we do. Even when we fall back into our old bitter bad habits, God remembers us, our real selves, and forgets the selfish, petty people we can be. And forgives.

Can we do the same? Again? The way we did it ten years ago, when everything we knew was turned on its head? Forget? Forgive? Once ... seven times ... seventeen times ... seventy-seven times ... seven hundred and seventy times?

Remember? We did it once before ... perhaps we can do it again. And again. And again.