

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

Twin towers in the heart of New York City, the heart of the USA, the heart of capitalism, the heart of the west. Twin towers were strong, made of steel, and concrete, glass, and metal. They rose up over the city, symbols of strength and power and dominance. But they were fragile, too. When the winds came, the strong winds of autumn storms, rising up off the Atlantic, roaring up the Hudson, when the winds came whirling along the streets of that great city, then they used to sway, to bend, to move, to give, to dance. They were made of steel, concrete, glass and metal. But also of air, of light, of flesh and blood. They were weak, broken by shafts, riven with corridors, stairways, halls. They were struck. They were wounded. They broke, they bled, they fell. They burned. Windows exploded and air rushed in. Flames licked through the corridors and shafts. People fled, running down the stairs, or died at their desks. Girders grew hot, wall board ignited, steel began to melt - one floor collapsed. Crashed. Imploded. The beautiful towers slumped. They gasped. And they fell. They fell. They fell.

They are falling still, in our imaginations. The images of those falling buildings will be seared into our memories – those of us who lived through those moments – for the rest of our lives. The falling buildings – not fallen, but falling – have become an icon for us of the moment the world changed. Every moment before that moment was one world. Every moment since that moment has been a different world. The twin towers sit at the turning point, like a fulcrum, in the middle, holding all of time in balance.

And today's text is on forgiveness. SEVENTY TIME SEVEN prescribes Jesus to the presumably incredulous Peter – who was really looking for a pat on the head for his personal proposal for extravagant forgiveness: AS MANY AS SEVEN TIMES? Poor Peter. He got blown out of the water – SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN – and then slapped on the wrist to boot, if it is true as Matthew records it that Jesus then went on to tell that troubling parable of the king forgiving his debts. It's nice to forgive debts – but nice kings don't hand their debtors OVER TO BE TORTURED UNTIL THEY WOULD PAY THEIR ENTIRE DEBT. Especially if the king in this parable is God, as Matthew suggests: SO MY HEAVENLY FATHER WILL ALSO DO TO EVERY ONE OF YOU, IF YOU DO NOT FORGIVE YOUR BROTHER OR SISTER FROM YOUR HEART.

A troubling text. Where do we put it on that balance beam of time? Does it come before the twin towers, because obviously that's when Jesus said it? Or does it come after them, because clearly, that is where we are meeting it today, and will meet it for ever more?

But that's always the question with forgiveness, I think. The question of forgiveness and fulcrums, I mean. Where does it fit?

We all have other fulcrums, too. Not just those twin towers perpetually frozen with the glass exploding out of their sides and the black smoke beginning to curl up into an airplane-empty sky. There are other moments in our lives that divide time into parts. Everything before is one way – everything after is another. Losing your first tooth. Your first kiss. Getting married. Having a

child. Becoming a grandparent – these are all fulcrums that mark the point at which everything changed and was never that other way again. And there are sad ones, too – the ones we carry like lead weights in our hearts, and try to bury away in the dark: the betrayal. The divorce. The diagnosis. The operation. The death. Nothing will ever be the same again there, either.

Where does forgiveness sit, on those balance beams? So easy to talk about, on the one hand, so impossibly difficult to live out on the other. Couldn't we just slide it over to the left, to the 'before' side? before the crash? before the explosion? before the ripping of girders and hearts? when it would have been easy, in theory, to practice the gentle art of forgiveness?

“Forgive your sister for pulling your hair.” “I forgive you.”

So much easier than “forgive the pilots for flying the planes.” Or forgive the terrorists for wanting to change the world. Or forgive your spouse for loving someone else more than you. Man – forgiveness on that side of the fulcrum is much harder to do.

Because of the pain, right? Pain just complicates everything. The Buddhists say that we cling to pain – and in lots of ways I think they are right. If you can't have your life back, the way you liked it on the left side of the fulcrum, before that world-altering event, what ever it was, at least you can have something to hold on to, to define who you are, to show that you are still alive. Pain does a good job of that. I know who I am: I am the one with all this pain.

Maybe Jesus knew that if we only forgave AS MANY AS SEVEN TIMES, then there would still be room for us to cling to our pain. It could still survive inside of us, down in the darkest parts where we seldom visit, where it could fester and suppurate and wreak its own spiritual destruction from the inside out.

According to the book, *Amish Grace*, on October 2, 2006 Charles Carl Roberts IV “carried his guns and his rage into an Amish schoolhouse near Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Five school girls died that day, and five others were seriously wounded.” (1) What an unimaginable crime – the killing of innocent, faithful children. It is a fulcrum crime.

But the response – the response of the Amish community – was equally unimaginable, and has become its own alternate fulcrum, dividing the world and time perpetually into “before this event” and “after this event.” The community forgave the killer. All of them – not just some of them – all of them forgave him. They knew him. They knew his wife. They dropped around to talk with her and their children – they brought casseroles, because she was suddenly alone and lost and frightened, a victim, too. They said they did it because of Matthew 18. SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN. Hard as it was, they just made up their minds and forgave him.

It didn't bring their daughters back. It didn't mend the bodies of the others who were wounded that day. But this act of individual and communal forgiveness was their way of staying balanced on that teeter totter of time. Before the massacre they were forgiving people. And afterwards, well, as you can deduce – they were forgiving people also. The fulcrum of the event would always sit there in the middle – dividing their history into two parts. But who the Amish were remained the same: a forgiving people, full of grace.

What ever personal event might be dividing your life into ‘before’ and ‘after’ periods, twin towers sit at our collective fulcrum today – as North Americans, perhaps even as the world. I don’t watch TV and so I am often out of the loop when it comes to the discourse in popular culture, but I hope that in all the commentaries and debates and interviews leading up to the tenth anniversary activities of today, I hope that there has been some talk of forgiveness.

Because human nature is what it is, I feel certain that some of the bereaved family members must have found their way through grief and rage and numbness to genuine forgiveness. And I trust that some city and national officials fought through the desire to retaliate and to strike back to a wider understanding of the global political reality in which the poor are being crushed to death in a period of increasing riches. And I know that aid agencies which have been working in Afghanistan and Iraq and Pakistan, places where terrorism finds its fertile soil, I know that they have been putting forgiveness into action, bringing education, food, health care and human rights where these have been sadly lacking. I hope that this tenth anniversary has given rise to conversations about that.

What about that king? What about that king who forgives his servant and then has him hauled off to be tortured until he can pay? The servant betrayed him. The servant, who owed TEN THOUSAND TALENTS – the equivalent of \$60 million – did not exercise the same prodigality of forgiveness when his own debtor presented himself. Owing the king everything, even his own life, the servant turned and tried to squeeze another man out of A HUNDRED DENARII, about \$10,000. Clearly being forgiven did not make that servant compassionate. He squandered the king’s great gift – and in squandering it, he lost it. Off to the torture chambers for him it was.

So, is God lurking up in heaven, forgiving some of us and tossing others of us into eternal fire? Let’s not try to get too literal with parables like this – after all, they were pretty simple instructional stories told thousands of years ago to illiterate peasants. They really only make one point.

But maybe the point for us today is this: if, like that servant who was forgiven, but who could not forgive, if we get stuck in our pain and cling to our pain, dragging it forward perpetually into the future on the right side of the fulcrum, after the event that sliced our lives into two – if we cling to that pain, then we have chosen our own form of torture. It isn’t so much God who sends us there, as we ourselves. The choice is clear: forgive, or be tortured. Hard to do! But not impossible, obviously. The truth is, it happens all the time. Let today be a celebration of all the times that people choose to forgive!

(A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford at First-St Andrew’s United Church, London, Ont.
www.fsaunited.com)

(1) Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy*. (San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, 2007), p.xi.