

**Sermon: God's Choice for Good**  
**Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
**Date: September 11, 2011**

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The word that comes down to us and into our churches all across the world today as Christians gather into their places of worship is a tough one to accompany our remembrances of the tragic events of 9/11. We, like so many other churches, follow the lectionary each Sunday, that cycle of readings that bring us through the Bible over the course of a 3-year period, and of all the passages in our huge sacred book, we just happen to be brought on September 11, 2011 up against this great word: FORGIVENESS. What are the chances?

In the Old Testament, we catch the end of the story of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat when Joseph is confronted with his brothers who had beaten and abused him and left him for dead in a hole in the ground because of their jealousy of him and, as you'll remember, through the many twists and turns of his life that followed Joseph eventually found himself in a position in Egypt whereby he could make his brothers pay and pay heavily for they did... but instead he welcomes them and forgives them. It's there in the very story of origin of the Hebrew people.

And in the New Testament, we hear Jesus in the strongest of words emphasize the importance of forgiveness, telling Peter and the disciples that they must forgive a brother not 7 times but 77 times and as his parable indicates this requirement is based upon the premise that since we have been forgiven ourselves we must take a continual posture of forgiveness towards others.

It's a difficult teaching, to say the least, that reminds me of that quote by G.K. Chesterton: "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried." Forgiveness. And it's not simply one injunction amongst many that we must consider, it's really at the very center of our faith and at the heart of our identity as Christians. And conversely, adding to its difficulty, it is so NOT an approach valued by our culture. It must have been literally an hour after I had written this sermon that I was looking on some website and there at the top of the page was an ad for a new

series starting this fall on ABC called *Revenge* and the woman's voice over said "When everything has been taken from you someone must pay. When the law drops the ball, someone must pay." And then about three more times before the end of the trailer with images of guns being shot "someone must pay" and punches being thrown "someone must pay" and bombs going off "someone must pay" and then the screen goes black and the woman's voice one last time "someone must pay". By the end of this 1-minute trailer I was ready to go out and find someone who must pay for my struggles too! And then of course there is Hollywood's obsession with pay back and revenge and the constant diet that movie-goers receive of the revenge theme. Fostering a spirit of forgiveness in our culture hardly has a chance.

But I would also say that our culture's obsession with revenge is one of the indicators of that fact that our culture is disconnected from the transcendent and lost in the mire of the immediate material world, for forgiveness usually involves an assumption – it assumes a higher law, a God-given and God-held law of goodness and truth that transcends and over-rides all the little dynamics of our relationships here below, because...while forgiveness sometimes has a nice story line where everyone comes together and understands and all is hunky-dorey, maybe more often than not, forgiveness must be offered in face of the other who doesn't believe they've done anything wrong, who has no intention of apologizing, and where full reconciliation doesn't happen. Forgiveness often must be one person's opting for a higher law of goodness, love and mercy despite the result or the effect of the forgiveness. I think this is what Jesus was suggesting in his "forgive 77 times" talk, that forgiving like that is not about created some desired end or drawing some desired effect from the one forgiven, but it's about something higher, some greater law of love. It's an act of faith in the Truth of God.

As Christians we claim that the choice for GOOD and forgiveness is the right and true choice no matter the outcome and that the choice for evil and revenge is the wrong choice and this we could not claim unless there was some objective moral law beyond us against which the choice is judged. If there was no objective Good with a capital "G", higher than all of our various positive and negative acts as humans, then we wouldn't know to call what those pilots did in those planes 10 years ago as "evil". It would just be another act in the random and various actions that human beings take. But we say, "no

that's wrong, that's evil, it's not just another path to God another perspective on the truth", because in fact there is an objective moral law which such action contradicts, a moral law written into creation, within which creation is held and this is one of our pieces of evidence for our belief in God. Those who claim there is no God must then explain the existence of this higher moral law by which we know what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil.

But then one man's good can be called another man's evil and one man's understanding of God's will can be exactly what another would say is against God's will. At least some of the men who flew the planes that day on their suicidal and murderous mission believed that they were doing what was right and good and following the will of God. What gives us the moral high ground to say that it wasn't, that they were wrong, that what they did was not good at all but rather an act on the side of evil? The Christian answer to that question is it's forgiveness that gives us that ground.

As a nation we did have the moral high ground as the victims of such violence and we could cleanly condemn their act as evil, as the destruction and diminishment of life, and conversely that the numerous responders who sought to save life and to comfort the afflicted were clearly on the side of what was good and right. But, I'd say, we lost that moral high ground too quickly.. We lost that moral high ground, that stance of having feet firmly placed within the soil of good standing against evil when we turned from helping and healing and restoring one another to revenge and retaliation on a massive scale. It's then that we were drawn back down onto this world's playing field, and chose to operate as this world operates instead of being drawn up into a higher dialogue and a higher calling; namely, that of heaven. We ARE called as Christians to keep our sights set on heaven and allow heaven not this world to determine our responses and forgiveness instead of pay back is one of the central differences.

Now I know the objection and I'm not going to pretend it's not there. It's all fine and well to talk like that on an interpersonal level but you can't really expect a nation, an empire, to respond to an act of terrorism or war with forgiveness. It would be our death knell. And I think it's true – Jesus never tried to get the Roman empire to operate out of a matrix of forgiveness. No, he went directly to the individual human heart and inspired a spirit of love and forgiveness from within. He had no illusion but that the kingdoms

and empires of this world operated not upon the laws and spirit of God but upon the lesser laws and spirit of darkness. As a result Jesus was calling people to be first and foremost citizens of heaven even as they were secondarily citizens of Rome and to be citizens of heaven you had to operate out of the laws of heaven which held the laws of this world to a much higher standard, forgiveness instead of payback being a central one of those. And so yes, while an empire cannot be expected to operate out of the law of love, the individuals of it certainly can especially when their pledge of allegiance is offered to God's higher realm and it seems the church should be at least one obvious place where these citizens of a higher realm are infiltrating the nations of the lower one. And that is happening even to this day in certain countries, but not in ours. One might argue, and people do, that the church doesn't represent an alternative and revolutionary sub-culture of the kingdom of God in our country because our country's democracy mirrors the realm of God already. I'd argue that it's more a case of the church having fallen asleep in our country due to this medicated and numbed state that our materialist and consumer culture engenders in us. We could debate it.

For when we consider the harrowing Christian call toward forgiveness we realize that we are not messing with a comfortable faith, an easy commitment to a religion. When we hear amidst the pounding of nails and the torture of an innocent man the words "Lord, forgive them for they know not what they do", we become aware again that we are not dealing with a easy philosophy of life. When we see the trials and the sufferings of those who followed in the early days of the church and their unequivocal and unfied response of love and forgiveness because of a transformation that had occurred within their hearts, we become aware that a commitment to our faith should be something full of passion and fire, fear and trembling, some evidence that we are citizens ultimately not of this world but of a world that is drawing this one away from its darkness and violence and towards a new day of light and love and life.

Jesus, the one we call Lord, stepped off of the treadmill of this world and rooted himself firmly in the GOOD, so much so that we called him the creator of it himself, the incarnation of God who designed it all to be good. And what he did was called a halt to all the insanity: he received the evil into himself, he was that original high-tower pierced by the violence of man, he received it into himself and he did not transmit the evil and the

pain to others, but instead he transformed it into good through forgiveness. He held the moral high ground utterly because he sacrificed his wholly innocent body to what was wrong, untrue, and evil and transmuted it into love. “Greater love hath no man than this, that he lays down his life for his friends”, the Gospel of John says, and through forgiveness Jesus transformed many of his enemies into his friends and it was for all of them and all of us that he lay down his life. And even today 2000 years later the power generated by that act is accessible and transferable to us if it is what we choose for ourselves with courage and the intent of transmit such love on to others. It is a harrowing and narrow call, not for the faint of heart...

#### Pastoral Prayer

Remember us, O God, re-member us into the body of Christ for the work of Christ in this world. Remind us of our own need to be forgiven, our own inner terrorist, who prefers to destroy that which is threatening him rather than face his own wounds and sins, who prefers to make others pay for her own pain rather than transfigure her pain into love. Remind us of our own need to be forgiven so that we may approach the people around us with a generous spirit of forgiveness as well. Let not our hearts be hardened by fear and injury, somehow, and let not others who we have scared and injured have their hearts hardened towards us. It is a radical and difficult call that you have pursued us with, a heavy burden when considered under the standards of this world and yet seen within the light of the Kingdom our souls know your call to be easy and the burden ultimately light. Make us as a church more ready to discern your voice and heed your call and step out in directions that might be uncomfortable and risky for the sake of our allegiance to your kingdom and to our King and Lord, the Great Forgiving Victim, Jesus Christ, Amen.