

PENTECOST XIII

Peter came and said to Jesus, "Jesus, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. Matthew 18:21

And the disciples say, *This is a hard saying*. Not only the disciples, either. It's still a hard saying, 2000 years later, and it may be an especially hard saying on this day, the 10th anniversary of the great national, and international, tragedy and travesty of destruction of the Twin Towers.

To contemplate forgiveness on such a day may be an unthinkable challenge. But then again, we Christians are called to think the unthinkable, and sometimes to act it, as well.

I spent some time during my vacation auditing an online psychology course from Yale. In a section on memory, the professor talked about our memories of cardinal events like 9/11. He said that we are almost all certain we remember where we were and what we were doing when we heard momentous bad public news, but that our memories are often wrong. This, he said, is an especial and difficult quirk of memory to accept; we may be willing to admit our memories of minor events are vague, vanished, or open to question, but surely our memories of catastrophic events are accurate!

And indeed, his lectures are from 2008, and recent neuroscientific research (I read just this morning in the NYTimes) tells us something different: *when we first acquire memories, they are volatile, subject to change or likely to disappear. Exposing ourselves to information repeatedly over time fixes it more permanently in our minds Every time we pull up a*

memory, we make it stronger and more lasting, (“The Trouble with Homework,” *Sunday Review*, 9/11/11)

So, think for a minute about where you were and what you were doing when you heard about the planes crashing into the World Trade Center and then the Pentagon.

I can tell you *exactly* where I was during several most signal historical events; and, despite the Yale professor, I know I’m right. When John Kennedy was assassinated I was sitting in my senior English class at Portland High School. The announcement came over the loudspeaker. A classmate, a boy I despised then and have never ceased to, said, “good, he deserved it.”

When the space shuttle Challenger exploded, I was getting into my car to leave the office of St Dunstan’s Church in Dover, where I was assistant rector. I ran back upstairs to tell the terrible news to the rector and our administrator. The administrator was the most affected, I think. She is a very feeling woman always, and her youngest son had recently been in a life-threatening car accident, so she was very aware of the fragility of life.

When the Twin Towers were hit, I was sitting in the rectory living room catching up with an older friend whom I hadn’t seen for several eventful months. Sam was down the street at Triple A Appliance looking at, I think, dishwashers. He called up and said, “You’d better turn on the TV. We’re having a national disaster.” My friend was immediately terrified.

Now think for a moment about 9/11/01, and how you *felt* when you heard the news about the disaster.

I suspect the memory experts would say that the accuracy of our memories about crisis events is colored and often distorted by our emotional reactions, and I'm not going to argue with that. But I believe that our memories may also be etched deeply in place because of our emotional reactions, the contexts in which we learn the news, and our tendency then to "retrieve" these momentous events frequently.

When Kennedy was shot, I was appalled. His candidacy had turned me away from my family's staunch and universal Republicanism (I'm sure that would have happened soon enough anyway, but he was the one.) And I was equally appalled by my classmate Mark Finks's (yes, that's his name) gloating reaction to the tragedy. Mark Finks has gone on to become a public face of hatred, Christian right bigotry, and homophobia in the state of Maine; he began as he meant to go on.

When I heard my friend Sue's reaction to the Challenger explosion, I realized how connected she felt emotionally and spiritually to Christa McAuliffe, the teacher from New Hampshire killed along with the astronauts. I got a new insight into the Body of Christ.

When I heard about the World Trade Center, I was not, like my older friend, afraid. I knew immediately what I could do, and what I had to do. I called the then Senior Warden of St. John's and said, *we need to gather the community. We need to have a service this evening.* We organized a phone tree (this was before email broadcasts, at least for us) and I spent the rest of the day watching television, with my laptop on my lap, putting together a liturgy for the evening.

Never have I been more certain of my job as a priest, or more certain of the absolute reality of the Body of Christ.

I never did become fearful or particularly anxious in the aftermath of 9/11. I became very *sad*, as did we all, the whole nation. And I became worried about our parish community: worried that we would become cynical, fearful, inward turning or even, God forbid, more conservative.

I should have had more faith. None of that has happened to us, though I fear the nation has gone in those directions. If anything, I think we at St. John's have become more hopeful, more active and activist, more generous, and most of all, more connected as a community. For this, I am endlessly glad and grateful.

The lectionary gave several choices for the Hebrew Scripture reading this morning. The one we heard ends this way.

But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. Thus God saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that God did against the Egyptians. So the people feared God and believed in the God and in the servant Moses.

The one I did not choose says

You blew with your wind, the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters. "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders? Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

I love Miriam and her women and their tambourines, and the horse and rider thrown into the sea. But it's a bit more gleefully vengeful than what precedes it, and I wanted to keep that tone to a minimum, especially on

this commemorative day.

I suspect most of us felt a bit of gleeful vengefulness at the news, last spring, that Osama bin Laden had finally been taken out. We would hardly be human if we hadn't. But I hope, as followers of Jesus, we have moved on from that moment, that feeling. I believe that's what all those saints lost in the violence of 9/11 would want us to do.

I have preached often that forgiveness, especially as Jesus teaches it, can be very hard indeed. And I've preached, as well, that forgiveness is more important for our *own* souls' healing and health than, generally, for those we are asked to forgive. Forgiving the perpetrators of 9/11 is a tall order. But I pray that we have moved beyond feelings of vengefulness, if ever we succumbed to them. Those are what corrode the soul and tear the fabric of community. And, I daresay, those feelings are what disappoint and sadden the heart of God, who forgives endlessly and forever, even as we are bidden to forgive.

Amen.