

Where were you 10 years ago this morning?

Like the Challenger explosion or the assassination of President Kennedy or the attack on Pearl Harbor, September 11, 2001 was one of those days that stopped the clock. We can remember, vividly, where we were, what we were doing. It’s as if our subconscious knew to push the ‘record’ button. This was a moment not to be forgotten.

Ten years ago I was walking home from Warrendale Presbyterian Church in St. Paul. I’d gone there to vote in the primary election before work. The morning was crisp, the sky, a beautiful blue. Megan and Micah clutched my hands as our shoes crunched through leaves that were already starting to cover the sidewalk. And then my next-door neighbor came running out of her house. She looked upset, in shock. I thought maybe something was wrong with her elderly mother, who lived with her. “Oh my God,” she cried. “Oh my God. You have to come see what happened. Hurry.”

It doesn’t take much for the emotions and memories of that day to come right back. The tightness in my throat as video showed again and again the shrinking space between plane and plate glass; the pit in my stomach as rubble and dust replaced steel beams and human life. The exhaustion apparent on the faces of rescue workers and the sheer anguish of family members posting flyers about a loved one who hadn’t come home. Ten years later I’m still overwhelmed with feelings of fear and sorrow and anger; but also gratitude, reverence, patriotism. My subconscious won’t let me let go. It’s a moment not to be forgotten.

We chose to focus on what happened Sept. 11, 2001, in worship because our world feels different today because that day. Some of those differences are for the better. Many people have sought to understand the teachings of Islam. Others make a conscious effort to

avoid stereotyping. Some place greater value on the freedom and liberty we enjoy in America, or show appreciation to soldiers, and firefighters, and first responders.

But the world has also changed for the worse. There is more fear, less peace. More hate, less love. More judgment, less mercy. It feels as if in some ways, we are less united as a people since 9/11 – or perhaps our differences are simply more apparent.

That is why the message of today's gospel is something we need to hear as we remember Sept. 11. Peter thinks he is being generous when he asks his question of Jesus: "How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" After all, Jewish tradition called for the need to forgive up to three times. Seven seemed above and beyond. And the tradition also allowed for avenging a wrong, to swap an eye for an eye or a life for a life. That's why Jesus' answer is almost laughable. It's as if he said, "How often? Well, take the biggest number you can think of, and add one to that, and add one to that, and add one to that..."

Jesus' point is that there are no limits of God's forgiveness. Just as we cannot fathom how far it is from the east to the west, there will never be a day that God will turn his back on those who ask him for mercy.

But there is a catch. God expects those of us who have experienced it to show that same kind of mercy to those who ask it of us, too. It's why Jesus taught us to pray, "forgive us our sins, *as we forgive* those who sin against us." You can almost take the words of 1 John: "We love, because God first loved us" and make of them a corollary: "We forgive, because God first forgave us."

This philosophy is at the heart of Amish theology. *Amish Grace* is a book about the heartbreaking 2006 massacre of five Amish schoolchildren in Nickel Mines, Penn. Yet, the authors write, "the biggest surprise at Nickel Mines was not the intrusion of evil, but the Amish response." To a person, members of the community insisted on showing compassion

to the murderer's family. For the Amish, forgiveness means forgoing vengeance, overcoming bitter feelings, and extending gracious actions to one who has wronged you. This kind of thinking is foreign to most of us. But it is no less than Christ praying from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

As we remember the feelings and actions of Sept. 11, and the way our world has changed because of them, I believe now, more than ever, we need God's forgiveness. And now, more than ever, we need to practice that forgiveness with one another.

So what might forgiveness look like on a day like today? How about not stereotyping all Muslims as terrorists. What about honoring this life as we honoring all lives lost. Perhaps a renewed commitment to pursuing reconciliation. Or taking strength from others who are at peace. Choosing hope.

Nothing we can say or do can turn back the hands of time. We can't erase it from our history or our hearts. But if we cannot find a way to move from the past into the future than we are missing an opportunity for God to use us to bring forth good.

Indeed, our God is a God who promises to bring forth good from the most desperate of situations. Paula Berry's husband David died in the South Tower that day. She was left to raise their three small children alone. Instead of giving in to her grief, she has spent the last 10 years helping create the Ground Zero memorial that will be dedicated today. For her, the memorial it serves as a reminder that while there were what she calls 'twin acts of evil' in New York that day, there were also hundreds of thousands of acts of good. Acts such as those performed by recovery workers, who combed so caringly through the wreckage that they were able to find a few personal items that belonged to her husband, David. She says, "This [memorial] reminds me of humanity at its best. And to participate in its creation maybe softens humanity at its worst."

That is, Luther Seminary Professor David Lose says, **the essence of forgiveness: the lifting of a burden, the releasing of a debt, the refusal to allow past actions and failures to define the future.**

Our future is not to be defined by what happened Sept. 11, 2001. Our future is set forth by God. By a God who promises to bring good from evil; to bring light into darkness; to bring hope and possibility and new life to places of sorrow and despair. That is why we place our trust in God. That is why we lift our prayers to him. In a minute, as the choir sings Rene Clausen's *Kyrie*, you are invited to go to one of the candle boxes around the sanctuary and offer whatever is on your heart to God. Because even in those moments that cannot be forgotten, we believe that God does not forget us.

That morning 10 years ago, my neighbor and I prayed together – she to her God, Allah; me to mine, Jesus. And yet, we were both praying for the same things: for peace, for healing, for mercy, for reconciliation.

Maybe that's what forgiveness looks like: Christian hands and Muslim hands clasped together in prayer in the time of trial. Forgiveness looks for common ground instead of surface differences. It looks at what might be instead of what has been. It looks for places where love can grow instead of letting hatred fester. It is centered in the heart of God.

Ultimately, that is the message I hope we hear on a day like today. We cannot pay what we owe. All we can do is ask God to break our closed hearts open. All we can do is light a candle, and lift up our prayers, and trust that God will listen.

Because in the end, we believe that God's love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. God's love never fails. And so, *kyrie eleison*. Have mercy on us, O God. Today, and always. Amen.