

SERMON- Proper 19 (A) 2.0
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Genesis 50:15-21

Psalms 103:(4-7), 8-13

Romans 14:1-12

St. Timothy's Herndon
September 13, 2026

Matthew 18:21-35

OPENING

This lesson gets heard, every 3 years, in early to mid-September and therefore is often used as a meditation for how the country might try to understand the September 11th terror attacks.

We are, somehow, at the 25th anniversary of that day and its memory persists in commemorations and documentaries... and deep within the hearts and minds and souls of our very selves.

Myself, I was a second year cadet at the Virginia Military Institute, on that beautiful Tuesday (do you recall how beautiful that morning was?)

Everything changed, in the lives of my classmates, and in my family's life, by the oh-so ugly and evil events of that day.

Later, perhaps as I way of trying to come to grips with that day... when I was a high school history teacher, I would assign my students—who had witnessed it as small children—the question, as an essay or a group project:

“What do you think should be done in the spot now known as Ground Zero?”

If you remember, there was then an ongoing process of what to put in the place of the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center site.

Their answers were interesting:

- 1) Some students argued that the bombed-out scene should be kept in a similar state, freeze-framed almost, as a reminder of the wound that had occurred,
- 2) Others said that a park or quiet contemplative memorial should be built to honor the dead.
- 3) Still other students said that it should be made into an exact replica of the original twin towers, almost as if to press “reset” on history
- 4) Still others, particularly male students, said that the Twin Tower design should indeed be the model but they should built even higher—with some students suggesting that, hyperbolically, the towers should be built: “as high as they can go.”

Notice the different levels of forgiveness embedded in those responses.

I don't have a visceral feeling about the ultimate design for what has become the Freedom Tower and the memorial that stands today.

I sympathize, though, with the planners and designers of the site, because their effort was not merely an exercise in physical construction, but one where healing and meaning and memory—and perhaps even forgiveness—are possible.

GOSPEL:

In our Gospel reading, Peter asks Jesus: “how many times should I forgive someone.... Seven times?”

Jesus responds: “Not 7 times, but 77 times.” OR sometimes it’s translated as “seventy *times* seven” = 490 times. A huge number to forgive someone.

Compare that to another number, a smaller one, from our Baptism, in the words of the Creed, we say we have “one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins where we are “marked as Christ’s own... forever.”

So, to recap things, mathematically, if that’s possible in God’s economy... there is ONE baptism which is for FOREVER, and that baptism enrolls you in a program of INFINITE forgiveness.

That’s tough math, for you and for me in our day-to-day lives, for us in the Church, not to mention for a nation punched in the mouth.

Here is some more numbers, maybe helpful: as Christians, we sometimes (and this is not a good instinct) think about the Old Testament and its great number of laws and how Jesus helpfully simplified things into ONE law: Love your neighbor. We think that the 613 laws (that’s the total number that rabbinical scholars landed upon for laws in the Old Testament) are preposterously hard to follow and we somehow made it out easy with the ONE.

We actually have it backwards. It’s easier to follow the 613, or more exactly, it’s easier to be a Pharisee who can quote chapter and verse and have a contingency and mathematical formula for everything.

Jesus is telling us here, I believe, forgive, and love, a million, a billion, a trillion, a gazillion.

You know that playground game that kids play to try to summon the largest number ever? That’s the deep wisdom of Jesus’ instructions to Peter.

SHIFT

And yet. And yet.

I remember on that beautiful Tuesday 25 years ago, having class later on (no wellness days or classes cancelled at VMI!) and it just so happened to be Military Science, ROTC class, and the instructor, active-duty major in the Army, wrote something on the board at the beginning of class.

As he turned around, it was revealed to be, just two words: “Righteous Anger”
“Righteous Anger....

That is (the professor said) what you should be feeling right now.”

Just this week, I was thinking about 9/11 and this passage and this sermon and doing a little poking around online... and... did you know that the 9-11 Hijackers stayed, the night before, at a hotel here in Herndon, on Elden Street, the former Marriott, now Trellis, before they boarded the next morning at Dulles Airport and American Airlines Flight 77, crashing it into the Pentagon at 9:37 AM
Summoned within me again: all these years later: righteous anger.

FORGIVENESS

I share those feelings because sometimes parishioners feel the need to rescue clergy, me, from our naivete and our idealism. They feel the need to return us to the “real world”, of hurt and pain and loss.

No need, I am already there with you.

My instincts are similar to Peter’s, I want a nice, approachable, number in order for us to perform our ethical obligations, “seven” is about right... it’s hard (Enough) and maybe even aspirational. We can make sense of that as “doable” if we are talking about the everyday moments in life, interactions with your coworkers/ family members/ drivers on the road that demand that we forgive others.

Most of us, though, to be honest, cannot even make it to 7. Think about your relationship with your boss or your spouse. The aggravations and slights and you name it. I would have trouble getting to seven. Marycelis has only been here a couple weeks and we have talked about how often forgiveness has come into play. Saying you are sorry, apologizing, seeking forgiveness

And then what about the **REALLY BAD ONES**: how do we forgive the truly appalling crimes and offense, the ones that we wish were merely hyperbole but are all too real? I am speaking of the drunk driver who kills the teenager, the predator

guilty of sexual abuse, the school shooter and the list could go on to include the 9-11 Hijackers. We use language like “monsters” and “demons”—hyperbole—to describe them because nothing else seems to fit.
How do we learn to forgive these?

Now “hyperbole,” exaggeration for effect, is a communication tactic that heightens our attention, it raises the stakes, it pushes our imagination and understanding to a higher level beyond the literal sense.

In our Gospel, Matthew and Jesus raised the stakes rhetorically and theologically, by doing so it pushes us to explore the limits of forgiveness, as we are no longer considering the day-to-day annoyances that most of us, thankfully, only have to deal with.

CLOSING

In cases like that, the question of “how do we forgive?” also can be asked “how do we remember?” and certainly where violence is involved, and trauma occurs, the science suggests that our minds and bodies are inextricably linked in that process. The word “remember” literally means to put your body parts back together. This might help us to understand what forgiveness look like as a larger group. As a church community, or city, or as a nation, it’s no longer a matter of private conscience, we are both aided by the ability to lean on one another.

I don’t have any easy answers about forgiveness, because Forgiveness, again, is hard: it is for Peter in our reading, it is for the king in the parable, it is for the slave as well, and it is for us as well as we hear the chilling final line about the consequence for the failure to forgive.

Church IS one of the few places that forgiveness IS talked about, and so we arm ourselves with the Lord’s Prayer and Confession of Sin that we say so frequently. Remembering both, and in this we don’t exaggerate... we don’t engage in hyperbole, that we there is one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and that Jesus forgave others, even while upon the cross.

AMEN