

Redeeming the Time

The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
Texts: Romans 14:1-12 and Matthew 18:21-35

Four years ago I was sitting with Margaret Herbert, Midge Crystoff, and Jane Howell in what I sometimes call my “summer office”—the brick patio out in front of this church. We were talking about how Marg and Midge were going to step down after decades of leading our altar guild...talking about who might be able to step into their shoes when the names of Donna Lasher and Roz Glanville came up in the conversation.

It was also, of course, on that beautiful September morning that our meeting came to an abrupt end when Jane Dye (who was then our parish secretary) came out from the office to tell us that the World Trade Center had been attacked.

You all know where the larger story has gone from there—how we have come to be in the ancient land of Babylon (now known as Iraq)—and how our world has changed in so many ways. I still can’t get used to going through airport security and watch my eleven year old son be asked to remove his shoes. When you begin to think about what we’ve been through over the past four years it is all a bit overwhelming: war in Afghanistan and Iraq, tsunamis, global church conflicts, and hurricanes leave us feeling unsettled and overwhelmed and anxious.

It is right, and fitting for us to remember 9/11 this weekend—an event that probably will shape this generation. It is appropriate to remember the heroes and the victims. But as Christians we are commanded to pray also for our enemies. Our baptism calls on us to be peacemakers. Out of the rubble, in other words, it is also appropriate for us to reflect on what it might mean for us to redeem the time. Beyond grief, we await Easter. How can we respond to God’s call in this time and this place—to be the Church—for the sake of the world?

Every time we baptize someone—young or old—we renew our hope and we look toward the future. As Christians we are not afraid to look death square in the eye. Our central symbol is the cross, a first-century instrument of death. But we know as we contemplate that cross that death is not the last word. It is for us a symbol of life—it points us toward the empty tomb and to the Table where we remember each week the mystery of faith: that Christ is risen—that Christ is here, now. It is a reminder that we are called to bear witness to that truth in the world; that is our primary mission. Having been baptized into his death and resurrection we are called to redeem the time—that is to be the Church. In a few moments we will welcome Andrew Steven into that fellowship of love.

What does that look like—this notion of “being the church?” Each year at this time I try to remind us that the church is not a building, but a people. That I am the Church, that you are the Church, that we are the Church together. We have to keep saying that until we believe it, and once we believe it we need to live it. Our ministry is an extension of our Baptism—it is nothing less than what it means to live the Baptismal Covenant. Sometimes that sounds like a guilt trip, or like pressure that comes at so many of us from so many directions to join the PTA, or coach soccer, or to make sure our kids get dance lessons. Many of our lives are filled with busy-ness and the last thing we want or need is to come to church and be pressured to do more. We come here to be, not do; to renew our strength, not to grow weary.

Fair enough. And yet part of spiritual growth—for an individual and for a parish—is to pause every now and again and figure out what our gifts are, what our ministry truly is—so those gifts can be shared for the sake of the gospel. Sometimes ministries do need to die; they belong to the vision of a past generation and we have neither the time, the passion, or the energy to do them. Sometimes new ministries are born as someone comes to us with an idea, with a hunch, with a hunger—and then by God’s grace and with the help of others implements that vision. No one needs to do it all; but we are St. Francis together—and there is a place not only at God’s Table for all but in God’s service.

As I see it, the most important part of my job as a priest is to remind us of what the Church is and what it is not. And that isn’t about my personal biases or agendas, but about the call to as faithfully as possible interpret the Scriptures. That is where we look for our guidance—and all the rest follows from there. The word I hear coming to us today is a word of tolerance, and of forgiveness. And while that isn’t all there is to say about what defines us, it’s as good a place as any to begin.

Tolerance. Or if you prefer to use Greek, *adiaphora*. That is to say, there are things that are not essential, not at the core, and we need to be able to live and let live about those things. That’s what St. Paul is telling the church in Rome. Not that people don’t have strong feelings about things; they do! Some people believe they are called to eat only vegetables while others say, “where’s the beef... make it rare, please?” God welcomes them both, Paul says. Some keep the Sabbath as a day set apart; others try to live in the presence of God a little every day. No matter, Paul says. Whichever is you, do it to honor the Lord. I think that many of the practices of our faith—even of our firmest convictions—are shaped as much by our backgrounds, our families of origin, our culture as by anything else. They can become stumbling blocks for the Church. So Paul counsels a big tent—wide latitude—leaving judgment to God.

And forgiveness. The gospel reading is from another faith community, this one in Syria—probably Antioch. Their struggles and concerns are different from those in Jerusalem or Rome. But there as anywhere where there are people, there is a need for forgiveness. How hard that can be! Both to accept that God forgives us and that we are called to forgive others.

Have you ever noticed that Jesus prefers telling stories to setting down dogmatic rules. Jesus invites people to reflection, he doesn’t “lord it over” his disciples. Stories invite us to see things in a new way, and they are without a doubt his very favorite way of teaching. So Jesus doesn’t say, “you better forgive or else you are going to hell...” The Church has had a tendency to add that sort of thing—which I think can leave people paralyzed and feeling like they don’t measure up.

Jesus tells a story. Only because most of us don’t understand the first-century Roman monetary system we tend to miss the point—or skip over it. One denarii is equal to one day’s wages. There are ten thousand denarii in one talent, or to put that another way a talent is like thirty years wages. So the guy is in debt like ten thousand talents which is to say something like a billion dollars. The debt is like that of some small nations. It’s an absurd number—this is Middle Eastern hyperbole which is a fancy way of saying Jesus is exaggerating. Now this debt is forgiven. The guy in turn is owed a comparably small debt but nevertheless a not insignificant one. One hundred denarii is like three month’s wages. So let’s call it fifteen grand. He wants every penny of what he believes he has coming to him; even though he’s been forgiven a billion dollar debt.

I think we are meant to laugh when we hear this story, and only after laughter might it bring tears—tears of joy, and of relief. It's a reminder to us that yes, forgiveness is hard—and yes people really do hurt us. But it's a reminder that none of us lives without forgiveness, that God isn't keeping score but has wiped the slate clean. That all is forgiven us—and that we are therefore in turn called to be aware of that reality as we go through life and find others who require our forgiveness.

I don't know what to say other than that when we get stuck that it is mostly ourselves we hurt, for we let the other continue to control us. True freedom in Christ is about letting go. Where that happens creativity and energy for ministry are unleashed, on both sides of the equation: as the forgiver and as the forgiven.

In his short story, "The Capital of the World," Ernest Hemingway tells the story of a Spanish father and his teenage son. It's the story of a strained and eventually shattered relationship that causes the boy, Paco, to run away from home. Like the father of the prodigal son, this father in this story longs to welcome his son home, and so he goes in search of him. When he comes to Madrid he places an ad in the newspaper which reads:

*Dear Paco,
Please meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon.
All is forgiven.
Love,
Father*

The next day, at noon, there are 800 Pacos at the newspaper office—all apparently seeking forgiveness from their fathers.

We live in a world that is in desperate need of both tolerance and forgiveness. Neither one is easy. But both have the potential to unleash missional energy—to free us up from the junk we carry around in order to begin again. There are worse ways, I am convinced, than to be known than as the church that is trying live these Biblical qualities. In a world of shrill polarities, I think it offers real hope for the world. Nobody said it would be easy...but put the word out: Paco, Peter, Susan, Bill, Joe, Jack, Andrew—all is forgiven.

And so come then, and eat at the Table of the Lord, the Feast for the Baptized—and then leave to love and serve the Lord in all you do. Amen.

© Richard M. Simpson, Holden, MA, September 11, 2005