

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Forgiveness – Sept. 11, 2011
Rev. Deacon Mimi Eick

Forgiveness – the theme running through all of today’s lessons. It is like breathing, an essential body rhythm which gives us life and sustains our life. In the spiritual realm, forgiveness gives us life and sustains our lives. Inhale deeply, ask and receive God’s forgiveness; exhale and pour out forgiveness on those who have wronged us. We find this rhythm in the Lord’s prayer: Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us – inhale, exhale. Over and over – seventy times seven, in fact, as Jesus told Peter in today’s gospel – ask forgiveness, offer forgiveness; receive forgiveness, offer forgiveness.

But now, think for a minute about how we might upset this natural, ongoing cycle of spiritual respiration, and unfortunately, humankind is often very good at that. We think that we are not forgiven – because we can’t accept forgiveness from a loving God even though we know Jesus died on the cross for the sins of everyone in all generations - so we just hold our breath and remain burdened with old sins. Or we can’t forgive ourselves or accept forgiveness from a family member or friend from an unhappy past, again restricting the flow of God’s fresh live-giving love and mercy.

So we adopt a life as the UNFORGIVEN, a state of being and way of life explored in a powerful Academy Award winning Clint Eastwood movie from the 1990s, which I recently saw again as a rerun. It was just as powerful the second time around. The plot revolved around a brutal assault which led to a series of attempts at revenge, a return to a violent way of life for the story’s hero, multiple killings week after week, including sympathetic characters and those who were truly despicable. The violence and killing leveled a whole town and much of its surroundings. It is basically a dark story where nobody gave an inch and nobody thought to spread God’s fresh air of forgiveness around the town of Big Whiskey.

Contrast this darkness and violence with the Joseph story we heard in the Old Testament reading this morning. You remember Joseph – the bratty younger brother, favored by his father Jacob. Jacob gave Joseph a coat of many colors and Joseph paraded around and lorded it over his older brothers. Boy, did they get back at him – threw him in a pit and left him. Eventually, he was sold into slavery in Egypt. We catch up with him today as an adult, elevated, through God’s grace, into the position of chief advisor to the pharaoh. Elevated into this position after a hard life and some years in prison, years, I think, which must have been lonely and sad. Joseph, however, kept breathing, walking closely with his God. Now here he is unknown to his older brothers who have come to Egypt in a time of famine. The little brother now occupies a position of power, power over his brothers – revenge or forgiveness? In contrast to the UNFORGIVEN, Joseph lets out a long, loving breath of forgiveness onto these brothers who did him so much wrong. There is a reunion and reconciliation and the nation of Israel is saved from famine. Joseph provides for his family to move to Egypt and rebuild themselves into a great nation –

eventually returning to the promised land under the guidance of Moses. Joseph pours out forgiveness on his brothers and changes the course of history. No revenge in the family this time, no more jealousy or loneliness and God's plan for his chosen people moves on through the ages.

And so we come forward to today – Sept. 11, 2011, ten years from the horror of planes crashing into towers, from the death of thousands, so many stranded by the collapsing towers and so many dying in heroic attempts to save them.

How does forgiveness fit in here, forgiveness seven times seventy times – how to exhale forgiveness into the face of all this terror and death? The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori, called today, Sept. 11, 2011, a day for reflection, a day to look for fitting memorials to those who died in 2001. I remember that, over a period of weeks, the Oregonian carried the stories of the thousands who died. – I disciplined myself to read every one of them, each carried so much sadness and loss. It was overwhelming. There are a number of beautiful architectural memorials to honor those lives and how can we participate in fitting memorials? The Presiding Bishop asked that we reflect on a spiritual memorial such as our roles as peacemakers, those who are blessed as Matthew's gospel tells us in the beatitudes - those who bring peace to their families, workplaces, and to the world.

Does a church picnic fit into a spiritual memorial – and it is picnic day? I think maybe it does – When a community such as ours and that of the Oregon Jusarang Church gathers to eat, play, and visit with each other, we affirm and celebrate that we are vibrant, welcoming communities of healing, worship, and hope – and not just a vague sort of hope - This year St. James is joining all the churches in the diocese to help rebuild the cathedral in Haiti which was destroyed by an earthquake. This cathedral was not only a place for worship and beauty, but also a center of education, social services, and refuge in the poorest country in our hemisphere. We have a Hope for Haiti table at the picnic – please visit it to affirm the work our community is doing internationally and at home. As we enjoy spending today with our community, we might also reflect on the last ten years, and the goodness and love we have brought to our neighbors and the world. And then reflect on what we might do in the years to come to follow the God we hear calling to us throughout the scriptures, the God who forgives all our sins, the God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. AMEN