

*The Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time
We Remember on the Tenth Anniversary
of September 11, 2011
Homily*

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It's hard to believe that this is the tenth anniversary of the tragic event we know simply by its date *9/11*. Many of us were glued to our television screens and witnessed the collapse of the World Trade Center as it happened. It is a sight many of us will never forget.

This is a day that is very difficult for citizens of our country. Included among those 3,000 innocent victims were 836 first responders, firefighters and police personnel who had come to rescue people from the terrorist attacks. The overwhelming majority of casualties in all four attacks were civilians, including nationals of over seventy countries.

9/11 is difficult for our country. September 11 is particularly difficult for Christians. It is either ironic or providential that God's word is all about forgiveness. From the Book of Sirach we hear,

*Wrath and anger are hateful things,
yet the sinner hugs them tight...
Forgive your neighbor's injustice;
then when you pray, your own
sins will be forgiven.*

Then in the Gospel for today, Peter came to Jesus and asked,

*"Lord, if my brother sins against me,
how often must I forgive? As many
as seven times?"
Jesus answered, "I say to you, not
seven times but seventy-seven times."*

When it comes to 9/11, forgiveness is the last thing many Americans plan to do. Being human, the people who are responsible for this terrible crime are the last people on earth most of us want to forgive. How many of us would prefer to blow

these terrorists off the face of the earth and then forgive them? But as followers of Jesus, do we have that luxury?

There is an epitaph in a cemetery in Atlanta that a woman had inscribed on the grave of her husband who committed adultery. The epitaph says, “Gone But Not Forgiveness.” Some of us can relate to that emotion.

Forgiveness is not easy. Yet not forgiving can take an even greater toll on us than forgiving ever could.

Dr. Scott Peck, a psychologist, says in his book *The Road Less Traveled* that unless we are able to move toward the work of forgiving the person who hurt us, even the person who does not deserve our forgiveness, there will not be mental health. Forgiveness is not easy, and yet not forgiving can take an even greater toll on us than forgiving ever could.

Kenneth Hart, a psychology professor at the University of Windsor in Ontario, studied sixty-six recovering alcoholics. The individuals had one thing in common, they were all angry with someone. Teaching forgiveness, Hart found, is one way to break the cycle that causes recovering alcoholics to relapse. One of the former addicts said, “Forgiveness is more for yourself than for the person you’re forgiving. For me to forgive that person sets me free.” I wonder if there is anyone here in this room who needs to be set free?

Forgiveness is not easy. Ask God. Forgiveness is what the cross is all about. On Golgotha, God forgave the sins of the world through the suffering of his Son. Jesus, the Son of God, prayed on the cross, “*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.*” The forgiveness you and I grant others is built on what God has done for us.

This is the one teaching of our faith that separates us from all other faiths—we are to forgive as we have been forgiven. We are even to forgive our enemies. Why? Because God has forgiven us.

God gave his only Son in order that we might be forgiven. We in turn are to forgive those who have transgressed against us. Do you see why I say that September 11 is particularly difficult for Christians? Forgiveness is hard. Forgiveness cost God his Son.

This brings us to the final thing to be said: Forgiveness is only possible by God's grace. If someone has hurt you, deeply hurt you, forgiveness is possible only if you offer your hurt to God.

It may be that there are circumstances where forgiveness is not humanly possible. One theologian put it this way,

We who follow Christ are always being commanded to do things we cannot do. We are commanded to love those who are not lovable. We're called to serve without counting the cost. But the hardest commandment is the commandment to forgive. We are bidden to do it, not because it is humanly possible, but because as we try to do what God commands us to do, the ability to do it is given to us by the God of Grace.

We must forgive, not only because of what anger and resentment will do to us, but because forgiveness comes from the heart of God. We forgive because of the immensity of God's forgiveness on our behalf.

So this is a difficult day, and this is a difficult commandment. What it requires of us is nothing less than a new heart of God's love. Will you pray with me for that new heart today?

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