

Charley Reeb:

Well, hello there. This is Pastor Charley Reeb at Johns Creek United Methodist Church. We're so glad that you have joined us for remote worship. It's always good to connect with you in this way. Whether you're watching and listening in the morning, afternoon, or evening with friends or by yourself, we're glad that you've connected with us in this way. We appreciate it. Let's be an attitude of prayer together. Lord, we do thank you for this time of worship. Oh, how we need it. We need this time each week to be grounded, to be guided, to be sustained and empowered by you and to be reminded that we are part of your church. And although we are separated for this length of time, we know that in spirit and by prayer and thoughts, we are together.

And now, Lord, you give me the amazing privilege and responsibility of preaching your word to these, my friends and your servants on this well, very, very heavy weekend as we remember 9-11. And so, Lord, I ask you to speak to me and through me in such a way that all of us do receive a word from you that will make a difference to our lives. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

It's hard to believe that the tragedy of 9-11 was 19 years ago. I'm sure you recall where you were and what you were doing when those unspeakable attacks occurred. I know, I remember I was driving in my car on my way to church, to a staff meeting at the church I was appointed to at the time, and when the news was reported on the radio, I had to drive to the side of the road and stop. I was just stunned. When I got to the church office, of course there was pause over the entire office and the staff had their radios on and televisions on, and it was just a very, very sobering day. We didn't get much done in terms of church business that day. I'm sure some of you were watching the television as the attacks occurred. It's a sight that we will never ever forget.

Truly, we will never forget it. 3000 people lost their lives that day, 836 first responders, police officers and firefighters. Of course, most of the casualties were civilians. And actually part of those civilians was, I don't know, people from 70 different countries. Just a terrible, terrible unspeakable time. And this is a very, very difficult weekend for our country as we remember the terror of that day. But you know what? If it's even more difficult for Christians, and let me tell you why. Because of a particular teaching from Jesus that we can't get away from, that we can't explain away. In fact, it's a teaching that appears in the lectionary text assign for this weekend, and I don't think it's a coincidence to be honest with you. Sometimes the text picks us. It appears in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 18, verses 21 and 22, and this particular teaching of Jesus is in its simplest form, in this very passage.

This is what occurs. Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me, up to seven times? And Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but 70 times seven. Wow. Now we all know that forgiveness is central to our faith. It's part of Christianity. Christ commands us to do it. In fact, most Sundays, we dare to pray this particular prayer. Lord, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against

us. And basically we're telling God forgive us in the same proportion as we forgive other people. Now, on an average day, that's a very difficult teaching, but on a weekend like this, as we remember the terror of 9-11 and the awful violence of it, it is almost impossible, almost too much to bear.

The day after 9-11, Bishop Will Willimon was watching television and he was watching a couple being interviewed, and they were right before ground zero on the street and they were grieving. It was clear that they were grieving. They lost their daughter in the attacks and they told the reporter this. Well, the reporter kind of stammered and then said, well, at least you can go to your place of worship this weekend and find some kind of comfort. And the mother replied to the reporter, no, we won't be going to our place of worship this weekend because you see, we're Christians and we know what Jesus teaches about forgiveness. And quite honestly, we're not ready to do that yet. She said, no, it'll be some time before we're willing to be with Jesus.

Well, if we're honest, we can relate to that mother. We're human. And the last thing we want to do to those who perpetrated those attacks, to those who hurt us in unspeakable ways is to forgive. In fact, we want revenge. We want to do to them what they did to us. The problem is if we're followers of Jesus Christ, that is simply not an option. There's an epitaph in a cemetery in Atlanta that a woman had inscribed on the tomb of her adulterous husband, gone but not forgiven. I think we can relate to that sentiment, especially on this weekend. That may be the emotion of many of you, not only as you remember 9-11, but as you remember and recall all those things that people have done against you. And the idea of forgiveness is difficult, but I'll tell you this, the longer we hold on to resentment, the more toxic it is because it's the very emotion that evil wants us to hold onto.

And Scott Peck wrote the great book, *The Road Less Traveled*, sold millions and millions and millions of copies from this psychiatrist. You know what he says in that book? He says that no human being can ever find mental and spiritual and emotional healing until they're willing to forgive, and the world will never be whole until we learn to forgive. Yes, it's difficult, but I'll tell you this and listen closely because I know some of you need to hear this today. Not forgiving will take a greater toll on you than forgiving ever will. It's like the old saying, being resentful and not forgiving is like drinking poison, expecting the other person to die.

Kenneth Hunt, Kenneth Hart, excuse me, is a psychology professor in Canada, and one time he studied 66 recovering alcoholics and they all had one thing in common. They had resentment in their hearts. They were driven by resentment. They wouldn't let it go. And Hart wondered about that and he said, if there is a way I can allow these recovering alcoholics to get rid of their anger and hate by forgiving, perhaps I could break the cycle of these alcoholics relapsing because I would get rid of one excuse to drink. You know what he found? It worked. In fact, one recovering alcoholic said, forgiveness set me free. He said, forgiveness

set me free. Indeed. This is what the cross is all about. What do we think the cross is all about? I mean, there's so many facets to the cross, but one of the big, big meanings of it and truth of it is that in Jesus, God was forgiving us of our sins. That's why we forgive. We forgive because we have been forgiven. That is one of the main, main thrusts of the cross.

It's only when we give our pain and our hate to the Lord that we can forgive because that's the question of today, right? Well, Charley, I hear all that and I hear that's a big piece to our faith, but how do we do it? How do we forgive? When we think about the terror of 9-11, how do I forgive when I think of what that certain person did to me? How do I forgive when my heart is so full of resentment? I don't know what to do. How do I do it? The answer is you don't do it. God does it through you. You see, on our own, we could never forgive. It's only by the power of God and his grace and his love that we are able to forgive anybody. I mean, the Bible says, apart from God, we can do nothing.

No one has changed. No one has transformed. This world is not transformed except by the power and love of Almighty God. But I'll tell you this, when we're empowered by God to forgive and to love, we truly experience the power of God's love and his grace and we see a glimpse of it in our texts for today. And what I'm about to share, maybe you really didn't know because oftentimes I do get the question from people, Charley, what does that whole text mean? What did Jesus mean when he said to Peter, don't forgive 70 times, but 70 times seven? Was he given some math lesson? What does that mean?

Well, as I explained this to you, you'll truly see that Jesus was expressing the power of forgiveness. You see that phrase Jesus used was an ancient figure of speech, but Jesus was using it in the opposite way it was intended to be used. In fact, if you trace that figure of speech back, you'll find that it originally came in the Old Testament in Genesis by Lamech a descendant of Cain. And as I explained this to you, I'm going to get some water because my throat is a little dry.

But Lamech, as I said, was a descendant of Cain and he was a tribesman who listened, believed in blood revenge, blood revenge. He believed that. And what is that exactly? He believed that if someone did something against him, he was justified to keep on retaliating and retaliating with unlimited violence and hate. Lamech believe that hate and violence was the only way to settle a dispute. And I'll tell you this today, it is that kind of thinking that led to the day like 9-11. But you see Jesus, what he did is that he turned it around and he said basically in that text for today and to us today, if anyone sins against you, if anyone does something against you, you are not to avenge them forever. No, you are to forgive them forever. You are to practice unrestrained, unrelenting forgiveness.

You see, folks, this is God's way of eradicating sin and evil and hate in our lives because when would it end? When would it end? You hurt me and I hurt you. You hurt me and I hurt you. You hurt me and I hurt you. And when will it ever

end? It doesn't end until God's world actually self-destructs. Christ calls us to forgive. This is what we as Christians are called to do because we believe that the power of God is in love and forgiveness and not in hate and revenge. And after all, isn't that the lesson that 9-11 taught us? Have we forgotten? I mean, do you remember our country posts 9-11? Do you remember that? The country has never been better. People were flocking to churches and places of worship. People were reminding us over and over again how we need each other and how we need to love each other and stay together. Have we forgotten that?

Look around the world today in our country. And yes, I think we have forgotten that. The hate that exists, the division that exists right now, the racial division, the political divisions, the hate that is spewed. Someone said to me the other day, this is just awful. First we have COVID, then have racial division's and tension, then we have this political stuff. And now we have to remember 9-11. And I said, I'm glad. I'm glad. I'm glad because hopefully we will remember the lessons of it. Have we forgotten the lessons that we need each other, that we're all connected to one another, that we have to hold on to each other?

Maybe this will turn us around. This remembrance on this weekend. I have a friend named Lindsay Alley who was living in New York City at the time of the attacks. And about a week or so after the attack, she got on a subway and it was packed. The train was packed, and she was shaken, of course, still thinking about the attacks and very scared. And when she got on, it was so crowded she couldn't find anything to hold onto as the train moved and she just started to cry. Right next to her was a tall, muscular African American man. And you know what he did? He saw her cry. He gently put his arm around her and said, you just hold on to me. We have to hold on to each other.

Have we forgotten? And I love Mr. Rogers. I know many of you grew up on his television program. Gosh, talk about a model of love and grace. Oh, it's just so inspiring. But what many don't know or some don't know, is that Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister. It's kind of befitting though. It's not surprising. And one time he was invited to give the commencement speech at Pittsburgh Seminary. And in that speech he talked about visiting a favorite professor of his Dr. William Orr. Fred Rogers went to visit him shortly before his professor died. A stroke had left him partially paralyzed, but he was still pretty sharp in mind.

And Fred Rogers said he went to visit him because he was always puzzled by something theologically. He had this burning question. In fact, the question had come up earlier that day in Sunday worship when they sang the old hymn by Martin Luther, A Mighty Fortress is our God. And Fred Rogers was always puzzled by that particular verse that says this, "The prince of darkness grim. We tremble not for him. His rage we can endure for low his doom is sure. One little word shall fail him." And Fred Rogers says, Dr. Orr, what is that one little word that fails evil? What's that one little word that strikes evil down?

And after a quiet moment, Dr. Orr said, forgiveness. The word is forgiveness. Forgiveness is the only thing evil cannot tolerate. Folks, that's the power of the cross. Oh, there's great power in the cross and we teach about it, and we preach about it, many layers of it. Yes, God was doing something for us we can never do for ourselves. Something supernatural was happening on that cross eradicating sin and forgiveness. But there's another meaning to the cross. As Jesus arms are outstretched, it's the image of forgiveness. And Jesus is saying to us in the world, the only way evil can be overcome is by forgiveness.

And we saw that lived out back in 2006. Some of you may remember when a shooter went to a particular Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania and shot and killed five school children and critically wounding many others, and the blood was barely dry in the schoolhouse before that Amish community offered forgiveness to the perpetrator's family. And you want to know something else? At that killer's funeral, half the people there was that Amish community. They set up a fund for the killer's children. And the news, this world erupted, was scratching their head. They couldn't understand it. Every newscast in the world was covering it. Every newspaper, every outlet, they couldn't put their minds around it. So much so that get this, the story of forgiveness eclipsed the tragedy of the killing.

And isn't that the point? The power of love and forgiveness always eclipses evil and hate and pain and injustice. Shortly after 9-11, the Washington Cathedral held a service of mourning, and right before the worshipers left, the pastor gave this benediction, "Go forth into the world in peace. Be of good courage. Hold fast to that which is good. Render to no one evil for evil. Strengthen the fainthearted, support the weak, help the afflicted, honor everyone, love and serve the Lord." That should be our prayer every day, not just on this weekend. Jesus taught us that unrelenting forgiveness and love shown over and over and over and over and over and over and over again is what's going to transform this world and open it up for the kingdom of God to fully reign. One little word shall fail him, forgiveness.

Let's pray. Lord, teach us to be a model of your love and forgiveness. Oh, help us by our love and forgiveness to break through the noise, the hate and the vengeance, and the divisions, and the insults, and the criticisms, the pride, selfishness. Oh, Lord, I personally and honestly pray that we would allow you during this COVID crisis for you to work good out of it. And I know you are working to do that, but we have to be open to it and embrace it. And right now, in many corners of this country, it feels like, well, this crisis is just not teaching us lessons and making us better, but making us worse. Oh, Lord, teach us to open ourselves up to you and your grace and your love and your forgiveness because you do work your purposes out. You do work good out of evil, but only if we're willing to embrace it. It's in Christ and we pray. Amen. We're going to sing a song, of course, and we invite you to join us.