

September 11, Ten Years Later

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will

also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Every generation, I believe, has a defining moment. For an older generation, it was D-Day or Pearl Harbor. Everyone remembers where he or she was when the Allied troops hit the beaches of Normandy or when Japanese planes strafed Hawai'i. For my generation, it was the assassination of John F. Kennedy on that November day in Dallas. For a long time, my students spoke of the *Challenger* disaster as their formative moment. And now, of course, it's that fateful morning of September 11, 2001, ten years ago today.

We all remember where we were and what we were doing when those passenger jets, gorged with fuel, slammed into the towers of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania. I was about to leave our home in New Jersey for a year of research at Yale University when the phone rang. It was my father-in-law. “You better turn on the television,” he said somberly. I didn't make it to New Haven for another week or two.

It was a day of tragedy and unspeakable sadness. Husbands and fathers who never returned home. Frantic phone calls from loved ones on airplanes or high in the towers, calling to say goodbye and I love you one last time. Sisters and brothers and daughters and sons whose remains would never be found.

It was also a day of heroism and selflessness. Workers who threw disabled coworkers over their shoulders and hurried down the stairs. Chaplains who raced into the inferno. Police and firefighters who never returned.

Today, ten years later, we honor those who perished. And we grieve. That is how it should be. And we remember. It's important to remember, but it's also important what we remember, what lessons we take away from the day that will always be known by the simple shorthand: 9/11.

As a historian, I regard lower Manhattan as something akin to sacred ground – not simply because of the awful tragedy that took place there on a crystalline September morning a decade ago or because of some explicit religious valence associated with that place. Lower Manhattan is “sacred” because, throughout American history, this has been the proving ground for our highest ideals as a people and as a nation: our tolerance and embrace of diversity.

Consider. Nearly a century after Giovanni da Verrazano, an Italian immigrant in the service of France, discovered the inlet into New York Harbor, Henry Hudson, an Englishman under contract to the Dutch East India Company, nosed the *Half Moon* through the same Narrows and struggled north on the river that now bears his name. The first group of settlers to embark on Manhattan were Walloons, French-speaking Belgians, followed shortly by a modest influx of Dutch, Germans and French. English Puritans bracketed Dutch settlement to the north and east, in New England and Long Island.

African slaves began arriving in the 1620s, and twenty-three Sephardic Jews, refugees from Recife, came to New Amsterdam aboard the *Sainte Catherine* in 1654. Early reports filtering back to the Netherlands, the most tolerant society of the seventeenth century, told of Huguenots, Mennonites, Brownists, Presbyterians, Quakers, Catholics, even “many atheists and various other servants of Baal.” The Jews proposed to erect a synagogue, and French Jesuits from Canada mounted several missionary sorties among the Indians. Many colonists blamed the slave uprising of 1712 on Elie Neau, a Huguenot-turned-Anglican and an early advocate for abolition who ran a school for Africans in New York City.

Roman Catholics arrived in greater numbers in the nineteenth century, from places like Ireland, Germany and Italy. As with other groups, finding their place in the rich tapestry of American diversity did not always come easy. John Hughes, who became the first archbishop of New York (and the

founder of what is now Fordham University), protested the use of the Protestant-inflected King James Version of the Bible in the city's public schools. His objections prompted the "great school wars" of the 1840s, when Protestants threatened Catholics and their churches. Hughes made his case for toleration by appealing to the United States Constitution and to Americans' better selves: "Is this state of things, fellow-citizens, and worthy of you, worthy of our country, worthy of our just and glorious constitution?"

The vicinity of lower Manhattan was also the venue for signing of one of the most significant pieces of legislation in the twentieth century. At Liberty Island on October 3, 1965, Lyndon Johnson signed the Hart-Cellar Act, which removed the immigration quotas established by the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 and once again opened the United States to immigrants. The legislation, the president declared in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, "corrects a cruel and enduring wrong in the conduct of the American Nation."

Today's Gospel talks about forgiveness – seventy times seven, Jesus says. It's a hard lesson to apply to 9/11. The natural, human reaction is to wreak vengeance against our adversary, especially if he is unrepentant.

And part of the lesson of 9/11 is a reminder that there is evil in the world. Jesus told his followers to love their enemies and to turn the other cheek, but those injunctions don't necessarily apply to nations. Evil must sometimes be resisted, even with deadly force, lest it impede goodness or, as Martin Luther insisted, the gospel itself. Centuries ago, Christian theologians began to develop criteria for determining when the use of force is justified: Is it a defensive war? Have all other avenues been exhausted? Is there a reasonable chance of success? Have provisions been made, as much as possible, to shield civilians from collateral damage? These are the criteria for engaging in a "just war."

Those are high standards, Christian theologians agree, but evil must sometimes be met with deadly force. Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany come immediately to mind, and Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda probably qualify as well. But we must always remember that the only thing worse than the attacks themselves is allowing ourselves to compromise our values, to stoop to the level of our attackers.

Whether they knew it or not – and I suspect they did not – the terrorists who guided those jets into the World Trade Center were targeting the very heart of America – not because of the buildings’ association with business or commerce, but because their location in lower Manhattan has long symbolized America’s noblest ideals.

Our response in the decade since 9/11 has been spotty at times but generally consistent with those ideals. On the negative side of the ledger, Muslims have sometimes been targeted, and a cynical administration used the attacks as a pretext to rush the United States into two wars, at least one of which was irrelevant and failed to meet the standards of a just war. The toll of that war has been fearsome, not only our own soldiers but civilians as well. And surely the most reprehensible consequence of 9/11 was the use of torture against those the president deemed “enemy combatants.”

But Americans themselves, sooner or later, rise to their better selves and come to embrace the principles of toleration and respect for minorities encoded into our charter documents and symbolized by that tiny parcel of land in lower Manhattan. Not universally, to be sure, and far too belatedly in the case of women and racial minorities, but we Americans generally come around.

The proposed Islamic cultural center, Park51, provides a case in point. Initially derided as the “Ground Zero Mosque,” even though it was not primarily a mosque and it wasn’t at Ground Zero, Park51 has gradually won acceptance.

And, perhaps appropriately, the most ringing defense of the proposed Islamic center came from Michael Bloomberg, the mayor of New York and a Jew. “We would betray our values – and play into our enemies’ hands – if we were to treat Muslims differently than [*sic*] anyone else,” the mayor declared. “In fact, to cave to popular sentiment would be to hand a victory to the terrorists – and we should not stand for that.”

Well said – and utterly consistent with the rich history of toleration and multiculturalism associated with the “sacred ground” of lower Manhattan.

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 11, 2011
Christ Church
Middle Haddam, Connecticut