

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
September 13, 2020 Streaming Mass
24th Sunday of Year A Mt 18:21-35

Someone (Louis B. Smedes) has remarked that it is one of God's jokes to give us the power to remember the past and leave us no power to undo it. We might all wish to have a magic sponge to wipe away just a few moments off the tables of time, but there is no delete key for reality. These past few days have again brought to mind the tragic events of September 11, 2001. How do we deal with the memories of that fateful day? The site of what is again the World Trade Center has a storied past, having been built upon many times over. One hundred years ago, at the corner of Fulton and Church Streets, there was a bar once frequented by the American playwright, Eugene O'Neill. The bar was popularly known as "Jimmy-the-Priest's," because the proprietor had an ascetic appearance more befitting a monk than a saloon-keeper. The bar would become the prototype for the one in O'Neill's classic, "The Iceman Cometh." In that play one of the characters remarks of the bar, and he could well have been speaking of "Jimmy-the-Priest's," "It's the No Chance Saloon. It's Bedrock bar, the End of the Line Café...it's the last harbor." O'Neill lived upstairs over the bar in a room that he rented for \$3 a month. It was a low point in his life, so low that while living there he attempted suicide. He said of the bar's habitués, "They were a hard lot, at first glance, every type—sailors on leave or stranded, longshoremen, waterfront riffraff, gangsters, down-and-outers, drifters from the ends of the earth. I lived with them, got to know them. In some strange way they carried on. I learned at Jimmy-the Priest's not to sit in judgment of people."

O'Neill's play are full of the themes of resentment and recrimination, of charge and countercharge, of guilt passed down from one generation to the next. So, O'Neill could say of the world he described in his plays, "There is no present or future, only the past happening over and over again now." It is a world peopled by individuals whose hearts are beset by bitterness. Any one of us is open to the same charge, if we go by the self-fulfilling prophecy that no one can change, then no one will ever change. If we expect nothing to be different, then we will not allow anything, anyone to be different. We live by such adages as "a leopard never changes its spots" or "you can't teach an old dog new tricks." In doing so we hold onto our grudges like a dog holds onto its favorite bone. We provide ourselves with the morose comfort that we have everything and everyone figured out, that I am always right and you are always wrong, so I don't have to change because you can't, you won't ever change. Again, "There is no present or future, only the past happening over and over again now." It is the attitude described in this morning's first reading from the book of Sirach, "Wrath

and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight.”

There is a way to break out of that closed world, and it is the way that Jesus commends in the parable we have heard in this morning’s Gospel. It is the path of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a blessing for the one who has done wrong, as well as the one who has been wronged. Both are beneficiaries because both are released from the trap of being stuck in the same dead end in their relationship. Through the prophet Isaiah God announces, “Behold I make all things new.” It is the healing presence of God, made available to us by God’s own Spirit, Who enables us to create that future, to live right now in that future, rather than to cling to a desire to live in the past. Forgiveness is not so much a command, an obligation imposed upon us by Jesus, as it is an opportunity. It is an opportunity to break out of the world we have constructed for ourselves, wherein we have rehearsed the events of the past over and over again in our minds and imagine we have it all figured out, why I must be right and he or she must be wrong. In forgiving the one who has wronged us we enter the realm of God’s own reality, what Jesus describes as the “kingdom of God.” Because, if the very reality of God is all about mercy, about forgiveness, then as we are able to forgive, we are sharing in God’s very Being. We are coming to know God more assuredly in doing the God-thing of forgiving, than trying to imagine what God must be like.

To return to the events of 9/11. If you have visited, or should visit, the Memorial Museum at Ground Zero, you’ll see there a section that has a collection of some of the religious artifacts recovered from that day. The most well-known are the two beams of metal, remnants of the shattered towers, in the shape of a “cross,” that construction workers discovered standing in the midst of all the twisted metal from what remained of Tower One. For them, and for many others, it provided a measure of hope, of consolation, at a time that otherwise was so bleak. But there is another religious artifact there that I found even more compelling. It is what must have been the personal Bible of one of the workers at WTC. As the tower imploded that Bible was no doubt hurled into the air and in the tremendous heat of the conflagration that consumed the Towers, that Bible melted onto, was fused into, a steel beam that it landed upon. What is most interesting is the page of the New Testament which it happened to be opened to, the page fused to the steel beam. It is the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 5, the Sermon on the Mount, with the words of Jesus, “Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you.” Of all the pages it could have opened to, why that one? Go figure...

To conclude, forgiveness is not a single event, not just a word or gesture, but a process. So, it takes time. The first step is simply to pray to want to forgive the person who has committed the offense. Then, to try to see that individual as a human being,

that they are more than the terrible deed they performed. And, finally, to forgive. But to forgive does not mean to walk arm in arm down the street, with a smile on one's face. It is to "love" the offender, which does not mean to have to "like" that individual, or to excuse what that person has done. It means to wish him or her well, and what one can that is for the good of that person. To be able to do that is the grace, is the blessing, that faith in Jesus Christ can provide.