

St James United Church

Message for September 13, 2026 Second Sunday in the Season of Creation



“9/11 and the Way of Forgiveness” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Exodus 14:19-31; and Matthew 18:21-35

As I shared at the start of the service, we may be in the Season of Creation, and it may be the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, but on the minds of many this weekend is the 25th anniversary of 9/11, the tragic attack on our neighbours to the South. Significant anniversaries like a 25th are important times to reflect on the moments that shape us not just as individuals but as communities, nations, our world. I ask that on this anniversary you will let me reflect on the ongoing impacts of that day through the scripture readings offered to us this morning, especially Jesus’ parable about forgiveness.

I’m sure many of you recall where you were on the 11th of September, 25 years ago. I was on retreat in Saskatoon. We’d just finished breakfast. Someone had the TV on. Smoke billowed from the North Tower of the World Trade Center. None of us could believe it as we watched the second plane strike the South Tower. Like many of you, in that moment we understood that what happened earlier wasn’t an accident but an attack on the US. That attack did much to shape the world that we now inhabit, one less willing to live the vision presented in the parable Jesus shared in our gospel to follow a skewed interpretation of the reading from Exodus instead.

So, what do I mean? Ask yourself how many of us view the story of the crossing of the Reed Sea and from whose vantage point we experience it. It’s told from the perspective of the Israelites as God comes to their aid, rescuing them from the oppressive power of the Egyptians. God is on their side, the Egyptians be damned, literally as the text describes the bodies of soldiers on the shore. It makes sense that the story is told that way but as we read it should we put ourselves in the position of the Israelites? Many people tend to. We prefer to read Bible stories from a hero’s view, with God acting alongside us to vanquish our enemy, even if circumstances are morally more complex than that and we likely share some qualities with the oppressor in the story. It feels to me like that tendency shaped the immediate response to 9/11. There needed to be a response to the deaths of nearly 3000 civilians that day and another 9000 because of illnesses since, of course, but did it need to follow the “us and them” rhetoric, assumptions that “we’re the good guys” with others an axis of evil, especially as attention shifted from the war in Afghanistan to a push to invade Iraq? As a pundit observed, our continental cousins have been in war mode since that attack 25 years ago. That includes a trade war with Canada.

There is a good reason for this, even if a different path could have been taken. One possibility is that they’re still grieving, still processing their shared trauma, and when we hold on to sorrow

rather than process it, it often comes out as anger. As I reflect back, I'm not sure if sorrow was ever given as an option. Sorrow feels like weakness, and politicians were quick to tell people that showing weakness let the terrorists win. Do you remember President Bush telling Americans to go shopping, a sign of resiliency and making sure the economy didn't falter? How some scholars suggest this push led to the housing bubble and the 2008 recession and large swaths of working people feeling left behind, not to mention it sidelining dealing with climate change, are sermons for another day. Key to this one is how the push to get back to normal sidelined grief, giving room for anger. For some, even in Canada, anger was a first response with anyone who remotely looked Middle Eastern or Muslim scapegoated, taunted, even physically attacked. Laws giving police and border agents more power resulted in increased targeting of visible minorities, here too. I'm left wondering if that opened a door for the broader discrimination we see in the world.

This has been our trajectory, and yet could we have taken a different road? Our gospel narrative offers one. It opens with Peter assuming forgiveness has limits. Jesus' declaration that we must forgive seventy-seven times suggests that there isn't one. When we follow the way of God's kin-dom, we must keep forgiving, keep seeking understanding for another's actions. Why? Because the kin-dom is about community not division, about caring and supporting as Newfoundlanders and Labradorians did as planes were diverted to our airports. Now one could argue that was our response because we weren't attacked. True. But vengeance and anger just foster more. There must be a way after an event like 9/11 to live the forgiveness that leads to loving community.

We're given one in the next part of the story, in the advice in Jesus' parable. On the surface it's about forgiveness but at a deeper level it's about reconciliation. In the story, the lord takes time to hear the predicament of his slave. He can forgive the debt because he took time to ponder the why of his slave's situation. I wonder too if he considered the part he played in it, because we are all part of one another's stories. This ties back to the Exodus story, and the tendency to want to be the hero. When we step away from that to consider the tale more broadly as well as tangentially, we wonder about the Egyptians, the motivation to pursue the Israelites, the impacts of the death of their soldiers, wonder too about the Israelites, if everyone rejoiced in the death of charioteers or some felt guilty, motivating later calls to return to Egypt. This exercise is a model for the reflection that could've taken place post-9/11, pondering the why of the attack, not just the what, creating space for conversation, extending understanding, eventual dialogue with the attacker not the default vengeance of the slave who refused to forgive the debt of his colleague despite the compassion he received.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are not our go-to, a reminder we can't get there on our own. We need time as we sit with our sorrow, ponder, perhaps with bible stories read without appealing to a hero's view, talk through our feelings in a supportive community, let God's grace do the work so we can get to the reconciliation at the heart of God's kin-dom. We can't undo the responses to the attacks 25 years ago, but we can seek a way more reflective of the support and care shown by Newfoundlanders and Labradorians just after those attacks. We can with God's grace, as sorrow opens to understanding and understanding to reconciliation, to loving community. Amen.