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St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Arlington, VA
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**Sermon preached at the Memorial Service for
the Victims of September 11, 2001 and of Hurricane Katrina**

There are some events of human history that are so large in scope and so tragic that there are scarcely words to describe them. Such is the case with the attacks on September 11, 2001 that took us much by surprise. All at once, in four separate incidents, thousands were dead. We were angered and at the same time perplexed at the amount of anger behind such attacks. We wondered then as now, how human beings could do such a thing to their fellow human beings. They were attacks performed, so the terrorists told us, in the name of God, in the name of Allah. What kind of twisted love for God led them to such horrific actions?

There are also scarcely any words to describe the horror, destruction, loss of life, or loss of home and livelihood in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The magnitude of the damage caused by the hurricane to people and to property has begun to unfold over the past two weeks. What may have appeared to some as another hurricane on the day or so after it passed through the Gulf Coast, was, particularly after the levees in the New Orleans broke, a storm of another magnitude. The damage of the storm we have since found out took its heaviest toll on the poor – on those who had no automobiles or the means to get out of town. We do not yet know how many have perished. While politicians bicker and a lot of finger-pointing and endless blaming goes on, Americans have responded overwhelmingly, as have those from other nations, to this our most recent national catastrophe.

We at St. Peter's have moved from an initial contribution of \$2500 from the Discretionary Fund to a wide-ranging set of response –from the gathering of clothes, personal contributions to relief agencies, to the beginning of hands on volunteering in the places the disaster struck. As I said last week we, are only beginning to respond -- we do not yet know fully what will be asked of us in the future but we know that we, as Paul wrote in our epistle last week, are “to contribute to the needs of the saints” and “to extend hospitality to the stranger.”

This morning we remember especially those who perished in the violent and tragic events of September 11, 2001. We also remember those who perished as a result of Hurricane Katrina. The names of whom we are not yet fully aware.

Some of us -- some of you – have friends or relatives who died in New York, Arlington or Pennsylvania. Some of us have family who have been displaced and their life disrupted by the hurricane; some of us have relatives still unaccounted for in the Gulf Coast. Our prayers today are offered for each of you and for your family members and friends.

Today as we celebrate a Memorial Service we remember together, that is we “commemorate” those who died in these two separate disasters. Our grief and our concern should unite us to do what we can to help those who are grieving and mourning, that is, to help the living, and to bring to them the promise of new life, even from the ashes or the flood waters.

Today we mourn and we celebrate the lives of all who have died. We celebrate the many blessings God gave them during their lives and the many ways those who died

blessed their family and friends. To mourn and to celebrate at the same time may seem to be contradictory, but to mourn and to celebrate together helps us to heal.

In over 26 years of preaching, I have never experienced a Sunday when the texts chosen by our lectionary failed to speak directly to the circumstances in which I preached.

Sometimes, as today, the readings can offer surprising commentary or serve as direct advice to us. Here on September 11th, our readings just happen to be about forgiveness.

I still remember September 11, 2001 vividly. I was attending a Clergy Day with the Bishops in the Diocese of Pennsylvania when the news of the attacks first was announced to us. We soon dispersed to our separate churches with the charge from the bishop to hold worships services that evening at our respective churches. I got to the church and began to call the television and radio stations to announce our evening service. I notified the local newspaper and made the necessary arrangements for the service. The most difficult decision was what to say in my sermon. Colleagues of mine were saying that they planned to preach about forgiveness, but I knew that I, and the people of my parish, were just not ready for that quite yet. I knew, however, right then, deep in my heart, that someday I would have to preach about forgiveness when I preached about the events of that woeful day.

Today on September 11th, our readings are all about forgiveness. I must admit that had it been left to me, I probably would not have chosen to preach on forgiveness today. The lectionary, however, directs us there to confront one of the central themes of the Bible. My reluctance come from the fact that I am not sure how we can forgive those

who in the case of September 11th wish to annihilate us? I believe, however, that that is what God wants us who follow Jesus to hear this morning. From my experience, God somehow is always able to make his word living and true, whatever we read from it. Somehow, and I can't explain it, the fact that these readings are so appropriate to the day, is a manifestation of the marvelous providence of God. I have seen it over and over again, God's word is a strange two edged sword that cuts its way into our lives and continually speaks to us in unexpected ways.

The Psalm and the Epistle are particularly appropriate for a memorial service. In Psalm 103 we are reminded of God's great mercy throughout our lives and of God's great forgiveness and love toward us. This is one of the most beautiful of all the psalms. It reminds us of fragility and the finiteness of our days and of God's great mercy and forgiveness for us.

The passage from our Epistle today is central to the Burial Office of the Episcopal Church. In the opening sentences of the Burial Office we cite these exact words from Paul's letter to the Romans from our Epistle today.

None of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself. If we live we live to the Lord and if we die, we die to the Lord. Whether we live therefore or die we are the Lord's.

In its larger context, Paul is talking about how we treat others in community, particularly how we show respect for those whom we disagree. Simply Paul is saying, "It's not about you – we are the Lord's. Whatever we do we do for the Lord." That is why, Paul continues, we can never pass judgment on our fellow brothers and sisters without feeling under judgment of God.

Who are you to judge your brother in anything? Who are you contemptuously to despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.”
(Romans 14: 10-11)

This of course connects to today’s gospel reading. In the gospel, Peter asks Jesus, “How many times do I have to forgive my brother who has sinned against me, as many as 7 times?” Jesus said to him – no – 70 x 7. Jesus, in other words, counsels that there is no limit on our need to forgive. Forgiveness is central to all of Jesus’ ethical teaching. He says more about forgiveness than almost anything else in all his teachings. To be people of Jesus-- to be his disciples-- means that we have to make forgiveness the center of our lives.

I’m sure that we know intellectually that this is true. After all, every time we pray the prayer Jesus taught us, a prayer that encapsulates his ethical teachings, we pray “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.” We cannot expect God to forgive us, if we ourselves cannot forgive.

That is what Jesus is teaching us in the parable we read today. It tells the tale of a man who has been forgiven an enormous debt but who cannot forgive the small debt of his brother.

We know, I think, intellectually that we have to forgive, but because it is so difficult we often do not do it. We expect instead others to apologize to us, while we do nothing. Or we hold a grudge, and then another and another, until the anger and resentment run so deep we have poisoned our own well.

Let me tell you simply-- to truly forgive someone who has hurt you is one of the most difficult things you will ever do, but you have to do it. If you continue to

store up resentment, one day you will find that you have a heart of stone. Without forgiveness, our souls shrivel and we begin to die inwardly.

This week I was sent a copy of an interview with Bud Welsh, a man who lost his daughter, Julia, in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombings. After her death, he found himself in bad shape, drinking heavily and smoking three packs of cigarettes a day. One day he saw Bill McVeigh, the father of Timothy McVeigh, one of the convicted bombers, on television. He was working in his flower bed and looked at the camera for a couple of sentences. “When he did,” Bud said, “I saw a father with deep, deep pain in his eyes. I could recognize it, because I was living that pain. I knew right then that someday I had to go tell him that I truly cared how he felt. So I did.”

“The day I visited Bill McVeigh, Bud said, “he was out in his garden again.” After pulling weeds for a while, they went into the house and were joined by Timothy’s sister, Jennifer. There they looked at some family pictures, including Tim’s high school graduation picture. Let me read what Bud wrote about this visit.

“We talked for another hour and a half. When I got ready to leave I shook Bill’s hand and extended my hand to Jennifer. She didn’t take it. She hugged me around the neck. I don’t know who started crying first as we embraced, but we were both in tears. Finally, I said, “Honey, we’re in this together for the rest of our lives. And we can make the most of it, if we choose. I don’t want your brother to die, and I’ll do everything in my power to prevent it.” Never in my life have I felt closer to God than I did at that time. I felt like a thousand pounds had been lifted off my shoulders.

A person like Bill McVeigh is as much a victim as I am, if not more. I can’t imagine the pain he and his family have been through. I’ve lost a daughter, and if Timothy is ever executed he’s going to lose a son. I have a son, myself, and if he was convicted of killing 168 people, I don’t know how I’d deal with that. Bill has to live with that for the rest of his life.

I still have my moments of rage. I remember crossing the campus of a high school in California, on my way to speak to an all-school assembly, and looking around as I

walked. The place reminded me of Julie's high school. Suddenly this rage just hit me. So here I was, getting ready to speak to a whole auditorium full of kids about my opposition to the death penalty, and I was thinking to myself, "That ***** doesn't even deserve to live."

I know I don't want Timothy executed, because once he's gone, it will be too late to choose to forgive him. As long as he's alive, I have to deal with my feelings and emotions. But I do have setbacks, even when I'm sure I want to forgive. That's probably why I can't handle that word "closure." I get sick of hearing it. The first time someone asked me about closure was the day after Julie's burial. Of course I was still in hell then. In a way, I still am. How can there ever be true closure? A part of heart is gone.

It's a struggle, but it's one I need to wage. In any case, forgiving is not something you just wake up one morning and decide to do. You have to work through your anger and your hatred as long as it's there. You try to live each day a little better than the one before."

That is a powerful story of forgiveness, please do not let your thoughts wander off to what you personally think about the death penalty, the point here is that Brad learned the power of real forgiveness, and the healing began to happen once he let go of the anger and resentment that was binding him in chains.

Today we remember those who died on September 11th and those who died as a result of Hurricane Katrina. We can do nothing to bring them back. What we can do is to reach out to help those who are hurt -- to those who mourn. We can help bring healing to the hurt; we can bring comfort to those who mourn; we can give new life, new hope, to those who lost so much that is dear to them.

In conclusion, I urge two-fold action today. First, Jesus continually call us to let go of the anger and resentment that are binding you up and forgive others their sins -- even those who have hurt you.

Secondly, we are God's people, interconnected with one another. We are the Lord's; whatever we do we do for the Lord. So reach out and do what you can to help

those who are suffering from Hurricane Katrina. Find something that you personally can do to help. Remember we are the Lord's, it's not about you, it's about God. We are God's people who are called to reach out into the world to serve one another. Jesus, the gospels continually remind us, was called to bring God's love and mercy to the "little," the "last," the "lost," the "least," and even to the "dead."

We too, called to be his disciples, are sent out by Jesus into the world. We are apostles-- those sent out to serve. We are sent out to make real God's never-failing love and God's forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing power in a world so often filled with resentment, anger, sorrow, hurt, and grief.

As the hymn says: "Go forth for God, go to the world in peace."