

From today's Gospel lesson: "Lord, how many times should I forgive?"

As most of you know, today is Homecoming Sunday here at CGS, always an exciting day as it reveals our community at its very best – lots of people talking, eating, laughing, and sharing as we come together for the start of a new school year of ministry, programs and worship. And as most of you know, today is my first day back from a 4 month sabbatical leave of absence. Now if you're sitting there saying – wow, I didn't even know he was gone! Do me a favor and just don't tell me, this way I won't know that you didn't know!

But I do want to thank the parish for the wonderful opportunity to have a sabbatical. And while there is lots to share with you about my activities those several months, today I want to share one of my more poignant observations: Very few of my expectations and plans actually worked out the way I had anticipated. Now that's not necessarily a surprise, but because I was on sabbatical, all of the *interruptions* to my plans were more obvious to me than usual.

1) First of all, I was interrupted by some phone calls, emails and text messages from Pastor Alanna – all to be expected since it was an unusual circumstance to throw a newly ordained young priest into. But I wasn't expecting 3,457 of them! But I want you to know I responded to every one of them!

2) The week before I started on sabbatical Sarah, our communications secretary, announced she was resigning to take on a full time position elsewhere, and so I was interrupted by the tedious process of reviewing over 100 resumes, interviewing and finally hiring Andreyra – who we are excited to have on staff.

3) Next my wife Heidi seriously tore a calf muscle playing softball and was on crutches and unable to drive for over a month. Naturally I was recruited as her personal chauffeur – and of course drove her all over the place with a smile.

4) Then my presence was called on when my daughter Jennifer broke off her engagement to be married. I was proud of her as she bravely and wisely took the necessary steps to end a relationship that had serious, irresolvable problems.

5) My stepmother, my Dad's wife, died over the summer – and predictably that event came with the usual requirements of making funeral arrangements, and traveling to LI for the wake and funeral. Much time and energy has been spent since then trying to work with my 84 yr old Dad as we help him move into assisted living down in Florida.

6) Death also came to two of CGS's very active and beloved members while I was on sabbatical, Paul Jauron and Kelly Dvarkas, and I was privileged to still be in town to help conduct their funerals.

In all these events, what became very blatantly evident to me is something that is true - for all of us - all of the time: Life happens, and whether those interruptions happen because of things we do, or others do, or whether they are caused by external events beyond our control, life often gets in the way of our plans, expectations, hopes, dreams and desires. But what is important – the *key* for us – is not that these things happen – but how it is we *adjust* to the *changes* these events inflict upon us emotionally, physically and spiritually.

Today, the anniversary of 9-11, we commemorate and remember one such event in the life of our nation, that in similar fashion, seriously interrupted our lives and inflicted changes that we've had to react and adjust to. We attempt to bring closure not only to the event, but to the failed power of revenge. We are not safer now than we were then. In fact in some ways we are more weighed down with anxiety, fear, wasted money, time, bombs, and more lost lives.

Ten years ago, shortly after 911, I preached the following words:

"We do need a plan of action to root out and ostracize those who would destroy life, but in developing that plan we must be careful not to get sucked into the viscous cycle of evil for evil that has done nothing but paralyze the Middle East for centuries. There is a fine line between protecting ourselves and others - and being a bully. We must somehow move beyond the reaction that we can duke it out with the bad guy, or we run the very serious risk of creating the environment that sustains and reproduces the very virus we are trying to prevent."

It saddens me to say that I suspect that for the last 10 years we have been sucked into that cycle with wars and actions that have only seemed successful at creating more enemies, rather than solving the problem of dealing with extremists and terrorists.

And so I find it very serendipitous, that the lessons assigned for today, from a lectionary schedule created 30 years ago, have to do with forgiveness. Wow – certainly we are being challenged today by Joseph's refusal to take revenge in our Old Testament lesson, and Jesus' comments about forgiveness in the Gospel. They cut to the heart of the matter, not just on this the anniversary of 911, but every day that things take place for which we have a hard time forgiving.

Jesus is clear that there is no limit on forgiveness. While some may cheer the defeat or the death of an enemy, we as followers of Christ are to remember that the God who created us all can forgive all. If we belong to such a God - and we do - then we too have to work on forgiving – or perhaps I should say: work on trying to forgive! Perhaps that will help work toward ending that viscous cycle of violence for violence

But how can we work on it – what does it mean to forgive – whether it be the terrorists from 911, or our parents, kids, significant others, friends, neighbors, or government. Perhaps we can learn better how to forgive by not confusing forgiveness with its close cousins.

Forgiveness is not *pardon* – a court might waive punishment while not granting forgiveness, in the same way we can impose a consequence that disciplines behavior while forgiving. // Forgiveness is not *condoning*. We can forgive without approving of the offensive action. // Forgiveness is not *forgetting*. Some wounds are simply unforgettable. // Forgiveness does not necessarily mean *reconciliation*. We may with great effort forgive another but remain unable, or have good reasons, not to be in their presence. // And lastly, forgiveness is not *denial*. We must look the offensive action right in the face, call it by its right name, and be outraged. The healing needs to be as deep as the wound.

Finally we need to remember that forgiveness is deliberate work that is often costly, difficult, and painful. It takes time, and must be dealt with step by step. After all – the grace, mercy and forgiveness that God has for every single one of us comes at the tremendous cost of Jesus' sacrifice, pain and death on a cross!

Now it is near impossible to totally prepare for a tragedy, whether it be global or personal – it is called tragedy because that is the very nature of grief and loss. Those who are intimately familiar with the search for closure know that it never really happens. It is more like a threshold you learn to continually cross in both directions, back into the past and forward into the present, back again into the past, and forward again into the present, over and over again. What does happen in the process is that one learns to gradually re-imagine your life, or our nation's life – not as ruined, but as still holding hope for new life. That is what it means to be a Christian!

It is appropriate we are gathered today for Homecoming. Jesus calls us to participate regularly and take part in the church community – not because the church, the institution, needs us here - but because each and every one of us needs God and one another. In the programs and ministries we participate in together, we learn from one another about faith and life. It is in coming together that we learn to break down the barriers of hate and prejudice and hurt. It is in coming together that we discover the Christ in all of us and the parts in all of us that Christ loves. It is in coming together that we learn how to fight the good fight of faith. It is in coming together that we are fed with bread and wine and discover the presence of God's love, forgiveness and hope – inspiring us to work at forgiving as we have been forgiven.

Because how healthy we will be emotionally and spiritually *will* depend on how well we forgive - forgiveness is one of the keys to adjusting to life's interruptions from people and events that bring change and wreck havoc with our world! I pray today that God's wisdom and knowledge may help us - as individuals, as a community of faith, and as a nation - find ways to convey to one another and to all the people of the world - not hate and destruction - but the Good News of God's forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ.