

*Making Time for Re-memory*

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**A sermon preached by**  
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**Text:**  
Matthew 18:21-35

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## 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?”<sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”<sup>23</sup> “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.”<sup>24</sup> When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’<sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.<sup>28</sup> 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.’<sup>29</sup> Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’<sup>30</sup> But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.’<sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’<sup>34</sup> And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.<sup>35</sup> So God will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”



In Toni Morrison's brilliant novel *Beloved*, Sethe talks about what she calls her "re-memory." Sethe is an escaped slave living in Ohio who has killed her 2 year old daughter and tried to kill her other 3 children so they wouldn't be captured by a posse of slave catchers who have come to take them back to Kentucky.

Re-memory, for Toni Morrison and for her characters, involves not just remembering the past, but "remembering memories." Imagine the painful life-paralyzing evil of American human slavery and the toll it would take on any person. The experience of living enslaved caused most slaves to repress memories in an attempt to leave behind a horrific past." A "repression and dissociation from the past which causes a fragmentation of the self and a loss of true identity," if you want it in psychological language.

### Sethe:

"It's so hard for me to believe in [time]. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. . . . But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened."

### Denver (Sethe's youngest daughter):

"If it's still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies."

### Sethe:

"Nothing ever does."

If a house burns down, it's gone but the place itself still exists. Somewhere. It never dies. It lives on. Do we repress the painful memories of our lives? Or do we make time for re-memory of them? Or do we choose to "disremember" it – another concept for Toni Morrison – a conscious, forced act of forgetting something so painful that it seems like it's the only way to cope?

Peter came to Jesus and asked: “Lord, if someone 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.”

Seventy-seven times. It's not meant as a magical incantation as if saying "I forgive you" 77 times makes it end – Jesus is using metaphor here, it means an infinite number of times – it means forgive until the forgiveness is real.

For that forgiveness to happen, Jesus knows, you might have to allow painful, paralyzing moments back into your memory. And this Jesus moment is not just about forgiveness either – though we always do need to forgive and we do need to be forgiven over and over and over again. I think what Jesus is talking about here is about remembering also – about re-memory, if you will.

Do you want to remember September 11, 2001? Or would you rather tuck it away in the history books and roll it out maybe once a year? Does it cause you to try to "disremember" it – to force it into some deep, dark crevice of your life where painfulness and evil are parked?

Much of yesterday I watched MSNBC and their specials about 9/11. I watched 2 hours of the actual broadcast from that tragic morning. And it felt like a kick in the gut again.

The memories have come back throughout this week. Seeing, hearing, remembering – the confusion, the tears, the guesses, the rumors, and even already that morning the vocalized hate and calculated prejudice and calls for vengeance. Remember. This past week my own memories of that day have come back into my conscious life.

2001 was the only year in the 23 years of my ministry that I was not pastor of a local church. I was working as a Chaplain at Children's Hospital and at Inglis House, a 300-resident wheelchair community at Monument and Belmont Avenues. I had created a non-parish ministry focused on the spiritual life of people with disabilities. I was on my way from Germantown to Inglis House across the river when I heard the first news – it sounded like a

small plane had hit the World Trade Center accidentally. In the 15 minutes it took me to get to work and meet with the other chaplain, Keith, we knew it was more than that.

People gathered in Founders' Hall around the big screen television to see what was unfolding. On my desk downstairs was my US Air ticket – I was scheduled to fly from Philadelphia to Atlanta the next morning – September 12. I remember telling people as we watched and prayed and talked that if planes were flying tomorrow, I would be still be going. It seemed like once this was all worked out, whatever all this was about, air travel would *definitely* be safe tomorrow. That all changed, didn't it?

We watched as much as we could that morning. Administrative staff, residents in their wheelchairs, nursing and medical staff, social workers, housekeeping, volunteers, visiting family members. We watched. Keith and I did our chaplaincy thing – checking in on people's emotional well-being, listening to people express their fear and sadness and confusion, praying, comforting, drying tears.

By about 11 am, the worst seemed over – the towers were down, the Pentagon was smoldering, Flight 93 had crashed. It was all beginning to sink in. People began to move from the gathering room to begin their routines. Of course everyone kept checking in with each other. People would glance at TVs in residents' rooms as they walked the hallways or check computer news or listen to the radio. Keith and I met and began planning a worship service for the community – for 2 pm, I think. We pulled it together and went into pastoral care mode walking the halls, checking in, listening to people.

I walked by Founders' Hall again. It was empty save one man sitting in a metal folding chair staring at the TV. John was the Chief Administrator of Inglis House. I walked in and stood next to him in silence for a few seconds – no words were necessary. He was transfixed. "It's horrible." I said. "Yes, it is." "It's a different world now," I said – or something like that – and then I realized.

John's new daughter was born yesterday – September 10. He was back today just for a few hours.

“Congratulations,” I offered John. “Thanks.”

John's life was changed yesterday – that world that baby was born into changed dramatically today. I often wonder about that little girl – 10 years old yesterday – my mom's birthday today, she's 87. Does that family make the connection each year? What does my mom think about this day 10 years ago?

Emails were coming in as people wrote about the morning. My friend, Bill, works at the Rutgers Medical School in North Jersey. He wrote about being able to see from his office window the smoke rising from Manhattan revealing how close he was to the tragedy. I wrote back to our E-list of people in disability ministry around the world. I wrote that I was 2 hours south of New York City, 2 hours north of Washington, DC, and that I was ministering with people with disabilities who use wheelchairs – most residents have limited or even no use of their arms or legs – people with disabilities who rarely have any control over most of their lives – and here we sat in a major city between these two major cities and we could do nothing – were we next? One more moment in their lives where they had no control – yet everyone experiencing that morning felt like they had no control either. I remember hearing back from someone in England expressing solidarity and asking if he could publish what I wrote.

I went home that evening. Checked in with my children and got them settled – the girls were with their mom that night, Tim was with me. At 5 pm I turned on my pager to begin my very first on-call shift at CHOP. Five of us had been hired to be on-call Chaplains nights and weekends when the fulltime Chaplain wasn't there – we had just finished our training and orientation and we officially started Monday, September 10 – I was on for our second day of existence, Tuesday, September 11. I called the Emergency Department to remind them that we now were available through

the night and that if people were being brought down from NYC – which was still the expectation, that survivors by the hundreds would be rescued – that I would come in whenever they needed. No survivors came down here did they?

An Email circulated during that afternoon suggesting that people stand outside their houses at 9 pm that night with candles lit to reflect the fact that light can never be overcome by darkness. I stood outside that night with Tim and our neighbor, Fern. No one else on the street was out – but that didn't matter – it allowed me to check in and know that my neighbors were okay too.

I couldn't turn the TV off that night. Literally could not turn it off. It had played all evening – I watched it all evening – I went to bed at about midnight – downstairs I left the TV on – it seemed disrespectful to shut it down, it seemed like worse might happen if I turned it off. I lay in bed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of my house that night and listened to the quiet – I realized that I heard no airplanes overhead – I think my house was in a flight pattern for Philadelphia International Airport because I usually would hear them, what sounded to me like that slowing down hum that accompanies preparation for landing – not a disturbing noise, but I simply knew they were flying overhead – but not that night – it was eerie and it confirmed the reality of the day.

The next day I created a sign for my car window that stayed in there for at least a year – 3 symbols, a Christian fish, a Star of David, an Islamic crescent and the words “Shalom, Saalam, Peace ... before it's too late.” Friends requested copies and it made it way around the neighborhood. I stopped in to see my friends at the Sunoco station – a Pakistani owner and his Indian employees. I told them to please let me know if they were threatened or felt fearful in the neighborhood. “You know, we're not Muslims,” the owner told me. “I know,” I said – one of the Indian families had joined my church a few years earlier, the owner and others were Hindu – “but I also know how some people can be in times like

this. I just want you to know that you can count on me for support if you need it.”

Lacey, 10 years old, chose to use a computer art program to draw her reaction – a tower with a ball of fire at one edge of the page, a bright, blank sky filling the rest of the page. Tim, 17, began collecting photos from online so he could do a school project about the day.

Remembering. Memories. Re-memory. Remembering memories. What are your memories of that day? Not just where you were or what you were doing when you heard the news. But what were you experiencing? What were you feeling? What were you sensing about God that day? Where was God in those moments?

For the next few minutes let’s listen to each other’s re-memories of this day 10 years ago. Feel free to share ... nothing is too insignificant, nothing is too silly, there is no right or wrong ... there are just re-memories ...

Amen.

*During the next half hour individuals from the congregation re-memory-ed the day and the intervening years by sharing aloud personal stories and reflections.*