

A man sits down on the bus next to a woman reading her bible. He's a very religious person, so he feels like chatting. Excuse me, he says, are you a Christian? Yes, I am, she replies. Hey, that's great, he says, me too! So are you a Catholic? No, I'm a protestant, she says. He says, hey I'm a Protestant too! So are you Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian... She says, I'm Baptist. He says, wow, I'm a Baptist! It's nice to meet you. So, are you Southern Baptist, American Baptist, Baptist Church of God... She says, I'm Baptist Church of God. He says, wow you don't say! I'm Baptist Church of God too! So, are you Baptist Church of God Holiness or Baptist Church of God Tabernacle? She says, I'm Baptist Church of God Holiness. Wow! Incredible! I'm Baptist Church of God Holiness! Hey, so tell me, are you Baptist Church of God Holiness Charter 1895 or Baptist Church of God Holiness Charter 1949? She says, I'm Baptist Church of God Holiness Charter 1949. He says, Oh. You're a heretic.

We draw lines, don't we? Despite everything we have in common, despite all of our shared experiences as human beings, we draw lines. We have notions of who is us, and who is them, and we want to preserve those notions. Sometimes we do this because it feels good – if someone has behaved badly, or if I just happen to not like that person, I like the idea that I am fundamentally different from that person, because there's a line. It feels good.

Sometimes we draw lines because it helps us to feel close to whoever else happens to be on our side of the line we just drew. Have you ever been in someone's office after the big meeting, or off in a corner during the family holiday gathering, with a few others griping and gossiping about that problem person you all can't stand? The line you draw makes you feel a kind of bond with each other, right?

Sometimes we draw lines without meaning to, without even realizing that's what we're doing. We cut ourselves off from others, by labeling them as the 'others' even when we think that we don't do that sort of thing. It reminds me of a saying I once heard, that there are two kinds of people in the world: the kind who think you can divide the world into two kinds of people, and the other kind, like me, who don't.

Most of the time, drawing lines to separate us from them is simply the easiest thing to do. It is much harder to accept and believe that we are all part of the same whole, that we stand on a foundation of commonalities, that we're all members of God's universal family, that if there is a line, we're all on the same side of it. It's much harder to look at things that way, than it is to fixate on our differences, so praise Jesus, Hallelujah, we made it to church! Today is Gathering Day, a day we celebrate at First United when everyone comes out and comes together, we celebrate who we are as community that strives to draw the circle

wide, so that we can be enriched and empowered by folks from all walks of life, whose backgrounds and perspectives vary, but all are called by same loving God.

Today's gospel reading is a parable that Jesus told about forgiveness, and it speaks to the challenges we face if we want to get beyond the us and them mentality. According to the scriptures, forgiveness is about getting past the lines we've drawn between ourselves and others. I don't know if you've every thought about forgiveness that way, but as Jesus tells it, forgiveness is about recognizing the experiences we share, the burdens we all carry, the challenges we all face. When you forgive someone, when you release that person from your condemnation, and you also release yourself from your own bondage to the offense or the grievance you have suffered, this release is not about some sense of moral uprightness. Forgiveness is not about your or my righteousness. Forgiveness is not something that you should do if you want to be a good person. It simply comes down to a recognition of our common humanity, that we have all needed forgiveness and we should all be willing to offer it. If we make ourselves open to forgiveness, the lines disappear.

Jesus told the story of a man who owed a vast sum of money to his master, an amount he could never pay, ten thousand talents. In those days the average laborer might earn one talent over fifteen years of work, and this man owed ten thousand talents. That would be like a factory worker, owing the CEO more money than the value of the whole company. It certainly makes you wonder what he did to accumulate that kind of debt. The master asks for the money and the man doesn't have it. The master is ready to take it out of his hide or take it out of his family, but the man pleads. He says, "Be patient with me, and I'll pay you." This scene reminds me of the Sopranos - he can't possibly pay, but he's desperate to convince the boss that he will.

And then the master does something remarkable. He forgives the debt. He releases him of his obligation to pay. He lets the man go, free and clear. Okay, so this part does not remind me of the Sopranos.

Have you ever been given a gift that took your breath away? Were you let out of a terrible punishment or given something that meant so much to you that you could hardly believe someone would do that for you? Have you ever done something awful that should have ended your relationship but your loved one was willing to reconcile with you? Have you ever come back from an injury or illness that should have meant the end, but you got another chance to live? Have you ever received a gift that changed your life? These things don't happen all that often, but if we think about it, we've all received astonishing gifts, gotten help that we didn't deserve and couldn't have earned, and if we let them, these

experiences can be windows through which we see and perceive the love God has for all of us. God's grace is a thing of incalculable value, it is not something we earn or deserve, and it is greater than every one of our weaknesses and failures and that God's love is calling us beyond our dreams, and not only that, but God's love helps us to emulate God, to love as God loves. God's forgiveness shows us our own power to forgive,

If we let it, Christ's compassion helps us to realize the bonds we have to the whole of God's family, to feel the common ground we all stand on, to see humanity we share with people we might cut ourselves off from otherwise. .

The tragedy is, we don't always see it. As we keep reading in our parable this morning, we learn that as soon as the man receives forgiveness of his debt, he goes outside, you gotta believe he was feeling on top of the world, to have this burden lifted. But there out on the street, he sees a neighbor who owes him some money. The amount he is owed is a tiny fraction of the vast sum he had just been cleared of, but just as you and I do not always love our neighbors the way God loves us, this man does not reproduce the compassion that his master had shown to him. He immediately grabs his neighbor by the throat and says, "Pay me what you owe me". The neighbor pleads, "Be patient with me, I will pay you". But the man has no mercy, and has his neighbor thrown in prison for the debt. Did it even occur to him that the words his neighbor said to him were the exact words that he had said to his master just a little while before? It seems he did not comprehend that he and his neighbor were essentially the same - in need of forgiveness, and called to offer forgiveness.

Today is September the 11th, more than a date, of course, it's become a world unto itself, a panorama of remembrance, of ongoing experiences, of questions, and fears. September 11 is a landmark with which Americans gauge when and how our understanding of the world and of ourselves has changed over recent years. If you're like me you've been listening to a lot of news coverage over the past couple of weeks leading up today, reviewing and reflecting on our history over the past decade. I listen to a lot of National Public Radio, and NPR has been broadcasting dozens of simple stories in which people speak about their unique experiences on 9/11, acts of heroism they witnessed, and stories about the lives of those they loved who perished that day. You can't miss the common thread among all these stories, they are tributes, sacred testimonies crafted to honor people they love deeply and continue to cherish. I have greatly appreciated being able to hear these stories. They're the kind of stories that make lines disappear.

I know for a fact, that ten years ago, when the brutality and the destruction of the attacks were brought to bear on our nation, there were

many in the United States who felt a greater sense of unity with the world than we ever had before, because we experienced a kind of violence that we'd gotten used to thinking happened only in other lands. If you really think the suffering of other people doesn't affect you, you will live your life estranged from your family. For many Americans, the lines we drew between us and them disappeared on September 11, because we had occasion to understand the horror that hatred and violence bring wherever they take shape, we realized our unity with those who suffer in all times and place, and we became ever more committed to seeking peace in the way we speak, act and direct our resources.

Tragically, our nation as a whole, and certainly our government, did not come to that deep understanding. We grieved the loss of our loved ones, and decried the violence that was directed toward us, but then proceeded with military actions that brought a level of violence and loss of innocent life that vastly exceeds the violence and death on September 11. The man in the parable sought mercy but would not extend it, our nation condemned an act of violence and then multiplied it. It's been a hard decade, with far too much war and death.

And that's why I'm so thankful to hear the stories from ten years ago – I hope we continue to tell them after this anniversary has passed. They're not stories that call for war; they're stories that celebrate life, they're stories that introduce us to our neighbors, stories that teach us we that we live within a kinship that extends far beyond the individuals that we see and know. I believe that if we spent as much time every week learning the stories of ordinary people around the world, as we've spent the past week listening to the stories of ordinary Americans who experienced 9/11, we'd be empowered to live with ever-greater compassion, and we'd commit our nation to war much less readily.

So I'm glad that we are all here together in church on Gathering Day. I hope that you will come back every week. Bring your family, bring your coworkers the folks from your blocks. And get here early for Christian education, 9:30, I'm not kidding. Let's talk with each other about the things that matter most to us, let's teach one another about God's love and the promises of the gospel. Let's discover things that are true that we never knew before, and let's find out together, who we are. If you've been coming here for a while you've probably gotten used to hearing me telling you to introduce yourself the people sitting around you.

I don't say that because I heard somewhere that church folks are supposed to be nice. I say it because I believe that our lives are changed for the better, when we know one another, when comprehend our bonds as family members, when we realize that we are part of a shared story, when we feel the common ground beneath our feet. And as we know

each other and know God better, we'll start to see all the lines we'd perceived between the people of the world fading. We'll be able to forgive as we've been forgiven, to love as we are loved. What do you say - give it a try? Amen.