

This morning we read: As a loving parent cares for their children, so does the LORD care for those who honor the LORD.

What does that mean exactly? I think about my own children and I love them so much I get weepy sometimes. But then, a sneaky thought peeks in and I remember some senseless argument they had or a choice they made contrary to what I would have liked them to do and I find myself becoming aggravated. Those of you who are parents know exactly what I am talking about.

I wonder what does “care for” mean? Going back to the psalm: The LORD is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness. How many of us choose the high road of being kind when we feel wronged? How many of us choose to forgive when it is easier to be angry?

I'd like to share with you the story of a woman.

I have only met her a few times, but she is a dear friend of my husband Bruce. Rita is about our age and has always worked very hard in the hospitality industry and was divorced and raised her children alone. She is very kind and pretty nondescript. One day she met a gentleman and a relationship blossomed. With her children mostly grown and a couple grandbabies now, she found another chance. I remember the day Bruce came home and asked what would we do if we were to get pregnant again? I remember thinking – NO WAY! He said Rita is so shocked she is expecting. A new man, a new baby on the way, and a new grandbaby. Her excitement began to build with the thought of this incredible second chance.

I am going to stop here for moment.

I wonder if any of you are wondering – perhaps judging – did they get married? Or what was she or they thinking? I know I thought that a couple times.

Remember what Paul said (which I abbreviated a little): we “must not pass judgment; for God has welcomed them all. Who are you to pass judgment on another?”

Today's parable is about grace and forgiveness. Jesus tells of a man who is not simply in debt; he faces an impossibly large mountain of money to repay. I read a couple different places that a talent would be something like a year's wage. So, if you make about \$50,000 a year and you owe ten thousand talents – that means you owe something like \$500 million dollars. Then, when the king generously cancels the debt, the man, now free from the burden, goes out and demands payment from someone who owes him a debt equal to only a hundred days' wages - something a little like \$800.

The first debt was so great as to be impossible either to owe or to pay. That is, until we realize that in the parable, it is us – you and me – who are the debtors. We owe a debt to God that we cannot possibly repay. God has not only given us life, but continues to love us and want what is best for us when our every action falls short of the glory of God. Our sins mount up higher and higher until there is no way we could begin to atone for them. And through faith in Jesus, the Christ, we can repent, turn away from our sins, and find the debt has been canceled. And then, like the merciless servant, we go

expecting everyone else to pay up for the hurts they cause us.

Jesus' point is well made. God has forgiven each of us so much that we should go out to forgive others. But aren't some acts too great to forgive? On this day of all days, 9/11, we know how great an evil can grow within the confines of the human heart.

Back to Rita. Fast forward, a beautiful, perfectly healthy baby boy is born. They all decide to take a weekend away – Rita, her fiancé, her daughter, another friend, and these new wonderful tiny humans in her life. With everyone strapped in, they go.

Rita did not show up for work on Monday. They were hit by a drunk driver on their way to their vacation. Rita was severely injured and in the hospital. Everyone else in the van died. Five people – swept away – in an instant.

Life's tapestry is always a mystery to me.

Looking at acts of extreme and/or random violence, we ask, "Are there not some crimes to heinous to forgive?" "How could those of us who remain alive even have the right to forgive?"

The answer from scripture is two-fold. First, scripture teaches that judgment is for God alone. Second, we are to forgive as we have been forgiven.

In the reading from Romans, Paul says, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God."

We are, each of us accountable for our actions before God. We are not accountable for the injury done to us, but for our reaction to that hurt. We are then accountable for the actions we do in reaction to the pain we are caused.

Rita believes this scripture. She recovered from her injuries. She grieved her losses. She cried. She ranted. She allowed herself to heal through forgiveness.

Not forgiving, means holding on to the hate. Not forgiving someone is like drinking poison in the hope that the other person will die.

How many of us hold onto resentment and possibly even hate? We call it other things like "being set in our ways", but we all know what it is.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu knows about forgiveness through the daring act of helping lead South Africa through truth and reconciliation after the end of Apartheid. This involved thousands of acts of confession and forgiveness. He has written of this process saying, "Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. It means taking what happened seriously and not minimizing it; drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our entire existence. It involves trying to understand the perpetrators

and so have empathy, to try to stand in their shoes and appreciate the sort of pressures and influences that might have conditioned them.” When he came to the Red Wing correctional facility here in 2008, he spoke of forgiveness. He told the young men to look beyond themselves to understand what they had done and then look within to forgive themselves in order to move on.

Forgiveness does not have to mean forgetting, and reconciliation is not always possible. Forgiveness means trusting judgment to God, and this is only possible by the grace that comes from God alone.

I learned from Rita a lesson I think most of us would cringe at, but need to hear. She forgave the man who killed most of her family. She attended his trial, not to condemn, but to offer her forgiveness. She still corresponds with him to reassure him of her healing and forgiveness. I am humbled by this knowledge and a little ashamed because I don't know if I would ever even have thought to talk to someone who caused me so much pain, let alone write to him!

God became human in Jesus of Nazareth. He lived among us, not just teaching about love, but more importantly, showing us the love of God. Jesus chose to show power through his powerlessness on the cross. Jesus continually gave the example of turning the other cheek, of offering mercy, love, and forgiveness. God came in Jesus and offered us the redemptive power of his blood. He also gave us a pattern for how humans can live godly lives.

Children do not learn grace unless they are shown by example. Our mission with the children and youth in our midst is to show them unconditional love, provide a safe, sacred space to learn about God, and respect their thoughts and questions.

Children do not learn to forgive unless they are shown by example. Jesus' example was vital, as men and women do not naturally let go of past hurts. We have to learn grace and forgiveness. Rita is Jesus' example in the flesh.

Children do not learn to love unless they are shown by example. They trust us completely to have their best interest at heart.

Learn from Rita, forgive.  
Learn from the children, trust.  
Learn from Jesus, grace.  
Learn from God, love.