

*Hebrew Reading: Genesis 50:15-21*  
*Gospel: Matthew 18: 21-35*

**word count 2,043**

We stood on the empty streets of Manzanar, before the sun went down. Block 26, block 27, block 28...near where a young Nisei girl named Jeanne had lived with her family in a tarpaper shack. There was nothing of her here now, but as I read her book, “Farewell to Manzanar,” I learned of the life and hardships that had once taken place on these empty streets. Of spoiled food that made her family ill, toilets that backed up in privies that offered no privacy.

But now, there were only signs, an occasional concrete slab, the remnants of a water and rock garden, and off in the distance, the tall white grave marker of Manzanar, which was commissioned by the Issei when the deaths had started to mount up.

A lonely graveyard on Paiute Indian land, monuments standing long after the shacks were razed and gone. Whoever walked through the roped enclosure could not help but want to leave behind a stone, a penny, a plastic toy car, whatever was in their pockets laid upon these graves as if to say, “I was here—I cared, I give you my respect.” Carl and I each left a coin on the tall white obelisk that Manzanar residents had been taxed eleven cents each in order to pay the cost of the concrete.

Inside the Manzanar center, the former school and gym of the internees, we walked through the exhibits. The hatred and fear that surrounded Japanese-Americans was evident all around us, especially in the signs that were hung with quotes from pundits and politicians, including the rationale for Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066. I looked at Carl. He was shaking. He said, “I’m just so angry.” Within ten minutes, I was shaking with anger, too.

The little girl who watched her father drink because of shame, the little girl named Jeanne Watanabe who wrote a book about this very hot and this very cold camp where they were told they were being protected, although the guns in the watchtowers pointed in and not out; this little girl used the expression, “Shikata ga nai.” It cannot be helped. “Shikata ga nai.” It must be done. And thus were hardships born in quiet dignity because things simply were what they were.

The Gospel lesson for today is about forgiveness. It is the text from Matthew where Peter came to Jesus and said, “Lord, if someone sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Depending on the translation, Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times,” or “seventy times seven.” Jesus tells the parable of the king who forgave a slave his debts, and then learned that the slave was not so forgiving of others, and so the king threw him in jail for torture until he paid his debts. Jesus says that the same will happen to anyone who does not forgive their brother or sister.

For the past seven years, one of the subtexts of worship on this particular Sunday has been the commemoration of the attacks on America on 9/11. It has not gone away—the feelings and remembrances from that day still steal into our sanctuaries and fill our empty seats with their company; it is a presence that carries with it a sense of the unfulfilled, and it mourns in unfinished sentences, made of fragments without periods to place at a logical stopping point, for no end has found its way into our understanding.

When those of us whose job it was to find a theological frame for that day prepared to stumble into church that first following Sunday, the lectionary spoke of forgiveness. It was unthinkable, even outrageous, to hear about forgiveness.

William Willimon writes:

“The human animal is not supposed to be good at forgiveness. Forgiveness is not some

innate, natural human emotion. Vengeance, retribution, violence—these are natural human qualities. It is natural for the human animal to defend itself, to snarl and crouch into a defensive position when attacked, to howl when wronged, to bite back when bitten. Forgiveness is not natural. It is not a universal human virtue.”

In the passage from Genesis, we return to Joseph, whose own brothers sold him into slavery. Even for Joseph, the word “forgiveness,” is not spoken. Instead, he says, “Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.” Joseph believes that he must look for good in what was intended for harm by his brothers, and he promises to provide for them.

If we are not supposed to be good at forgiveness, if vengeance is a natural human quality, then we have only to look at our own lives and how we process these feelings before passing judgment on the larger events around us.

Is there anyone here who has been carrying a grudge towards another person? Have you held that resentment for a while now? Perhaps you are engaged in such anger now—suddenly seeing or thinking about someone you know and re-running the film in your head of what that person did that was so unforgivable that you are going to get back at them by letting it hurt you for as long as it takes. How does it make you feel? Good?

I have been guilty of holding on to anger from time to time, and when it happens, I remember words that I cannot seem to find written anywhere, but they go like this: “Acid burns most the container it is held in.” Resentment is like a glass of poison that a person drinks, and then sits down and waits for his or her enemy to die.

On Thursday night, I sat in my living room and was caught up in the 9/11 testimonials and tributes on television. I watched the clips that mesmerized us seven years ago, and their power has not been diminished. At a certain time, I left the house for an assignment I accepted, which was to be a mole at a “Yes on Prop 8 Town Hall” in Monterey Park, in order to report back to the “No on 8” campaign. Sitting among over a hundred people, I listened as a pastor prayed in remembrance of the events of 9/11. This was appropriate and as it should have been. But then, the prayer shifted in such a way to suggest that the failure to win Proposition 8 would surely bring another similar catastrophe. God’s wrath, in other words.

I wanted to stand up and shout, and considered it for a long, dangerous moment. I looked at the faces around me. These people were here out of concern, misguided as it was. They did not appear to be different in appearance from anyone you might know; extending the same courtesies, showing the same sensitivity towards others as anyone else. They listened to fear-mongering, shaded truth, outright lies, and pastors were brought up before them to assure them that God’s word is (selectively) in black and white. What conclusions WOULD they draw?

German novelist Gunter Grass once said, “The first job of a citizen is to keep your mouth open.”

Yet, balanced with that, Hannah More also adds, “A Christian will find it cheaper to pardon than to resent. Forgiveness saves the expense of anger, the cost of hatred, and the waste of spirit.” Instead, let’s work to bring about the realm of God for all of God’s people in the loving ways we have been taught, whether it involves forgiving seven, seventy-seven, or as Jesus suggests, any number of times. But let’s continue to work for that vision in the way we understand it. The problem is, we humans just aren’t very good at forgiveness, perhaps because we are not well practiced.

Because we know that we are not well practiced in this area, there are many wise words about it. George Herbert tells us that, “He who cannot forgive breaks the bridge over which he

himself must pass.” Our own UCC theologian and pastor Reinhold Niebuhr, author of the “Serenity Prayer,” goes as far as to say, “Forgiveness is the final form of love.”

So I probably shouldn’t admit this, but after my experience the other night with the other side, it is Oscar Wilde on the subject that gives me the most satisfaction. He writes, “Always forgive your enemies—nothing annoys them better.”

What will be our legacy as a race of people? How will we participate in the world from now on that can one day be observed in retrospect and laid at our children’s feet as a measure of who we are?

“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children...This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.” These are the words of President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Two things about our lives: they are irreversible and they are short. So we do what we can with what we have left, to make our peace with God, ourselves and those around us. We pray, “Forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors their debts to us.” We pray that and then we try to live it.

“I’m sorry but I can’t spell it out for you,” says Walter Burghardt. “It’s not for me to say to a survivor of Auschwitz: Forgive the Nazi who gassed your parents. It’s not for me to tell a rape victim, forgive and forget. It’s not for me to tell you to sit down and cancel all your debts. A sermon, like a parable, has different lessons for different listeners, different strokes for different folks. You have to decide for yourself.”<sup>1</sup>

And it certainly isn’t up to me to tell you that you have to hear today’s scripture lessons and somehow find forgiveness. It isn’t up to me to ask you to make that first move towards mending a rift between someone that you feel has wronged you. I’m not always so good at it myself. But isn’t it remarkable that these scriptures come up today of all days as part of the three year lectionary cycle, and isn’t it true that we grasp the important role their lessons will play in the future of humanity? But still, you have to decide for yourself how to hear them today, but surely there is someone you can begin to forgive, so that a change of spirit on a personal level can help create a corporate sense of forgiveness for situations and events that affect us all, so that we can eventually progress and evolve as a species before it is too late.

Carl and I stood on the streets of Manzanar. Empty streets, like Galveston’s and Houston’s today. A white obelisk stood in the graveyard; empty and alone like the above-ground tombs of New Orleans. There is an air of emptiness, houses gone—lifted off their slabs, and a stray dog stands nearby looking for food. Forgotten, and filled with an aura of shame that such a place could be recorded by history this way. “Shikata ga nai.” It cannot be helped. “Shikata ga nai.” It must be done, with quiet dignity. And through that quiet dignity comes, eventually, love and forgiveness.

Please join me in a moment of prayer. Please join me in communing with a God that takes us today in all of our brokenness.

“O God, Tender and Just, Strength of those who believe in you, give comfort and clarity of vision to the people of this nation and the nations around the world.

Give courage to our citizens in the path of the storm and our soldiers in the path of harm.

Open our ears to hear your voice; open our hearts that true justice and wisdom may abound; and open our hands that the violent resolution of conflict may cease.

### ***Sermon Resources:***

1. Walter Burghardt, “Sir, We Would Like To See Jesus,” New York, Paulist Press, 1982, p. 113).

## Scripture for Sunday, September 14, 2008

### Genesis 50:15-21

15 Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" 16 So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, 17 "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18 Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." 19 But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 20 Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. 21 So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

### Matthew 18:21-35

21 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?" 22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. 23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 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. 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 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.' 29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31 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. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."