

What are your thoughts on this eve of 9/11 as our nation ponders another attack on a Muslim country? The situations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria were/are rather different, but the deep drumbeats of war continue nonetheless.

It is a difficult thing to be the only superpower still standing. It's hard to know how to balance care for our own people with the global moral responsibility that attends enormous political and military power, and it's nearly impossible to separate our own self-interest from our calculations of what is morally right. I, for one, am very glad not to be the President of these United States; and as our President speaks to the nation this evening, we can do no less than pray fervently for him and for the Congress as they move through these treacherous days.



At the same time, it remains difficult for many of us to remember 9/11 without struggling at the same time with our feelings toward Islamic folk. That's as good a reason as any to be sure to come to hear Greg Barrett talk about *The Gospel of Rutba* **tomorrow evening at 6:30** in room 100. This true story grew out of events on the ground during the "Shock and Awe" that followed 9/11, and you'll find it most worthwhile.



The return of another 9/11 seems like a good time to reflect on the whole concept of forgiveness. I don't know how it is for you, but sometimes, when I think about the horrors perpetrated by some of our citizens against other citizens of this great land over the past several centuries, I am sickened beyond words.

And when I think about the horrors perpetrated by some of our external enemies in times past, such as what the Japanese did during the horrible Bataan Death March in the Philippines or what the Nazis did to the Jews during the Holocaust, or when I think about the horrors of Islamic terrorist attacks on civilians, women, and children over the past fifteen or twenty years, I am troubled by the feelings toward the Japanese people, the German people, or the Muslim people that emerge in my heart. And there are offenses closer to home with which I struggle from time to time, too. Perhaps you know what I mean.

In my heart I know that forgiveness represents the very heart of the Good News of Jesus. Forgiveness offered and received is absolutely central to Christian faith. Still, I suspect that most of us know a lot more about standing in need of forgiveness than we know about the power to forgive. Forgiveness is difficult. It is not for the faint of heart.

When wrong is done to us, or to persons or to institutions that we love, our relationship with the perpetrators of this wrong is fractured, if not completely shattered. While we know that Jesus told us to love our enemies and to forgive our offenders times without number, this is much easier to say than it is to actually do. We say the words, "I forgive you," but many times we say the words long before they become real. And I fear that such premature speaking may in fact short-circuit much of the spiritual power that the Cross of Jesus released into the world, robbing our lives, our churches, our land, and our world of much that God would give us.

The late Lewis Smedes, of Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, helped me greatly when he described forgiveness as a four-step process. These four stages are “Hurt,” “Hate,” “Healing,” and “Coming Together.” The first stage, the experience of “**Hurt**,” needs no explanation. “**Hate**,” the second stage, is our nearly instinctual desire to hurt in return, the desire to inflict pain even beyond that which we have suffered. While we cannot nurse our hate, we must acknowledge it and allow it to speak, if real forgiveness is ever to follow. Forgiveness will not be complete if it fails to penetrate the depth of the wound. Hatred and anger take us to that darkest place.

After we have experienced the darkness for a time, and it is sometimes a long, long time, we begin to be aware of another Presence beside us in our pain. If we open our suffering as best we can to this Spirit of God, we are gradually enabled to view our afflictors through “softer eyes,” and the third stage, an “Inner **Healing**” begins.

Later, as healing continues—perhaps over a period of years—we may quietly discover that our anger has disappeared. As God continues to grant us the mind of Christ, we may eventually find ourselves able to say with our Lord, “*Father, forgive them, because they don’t know what they are doing*” (Luke 23:34).

Then, as healing becomes complete, we may become able to invite the offender to restore the relationship—the healing, the “**Coming Together**.” This final stage of forgiveness, leading to reconciliation, depends as much on the offender as on the offended. Forgiveness, like grace, must be received.

Now persons who have been offended are frequently advised—especially in religious circles—to move directly from stage one to stage four, from “Hurt” to “Coming Together.” Far from producing forgiveness, such short-circuiting (which is really denial, distortion, and dishonesty) leads instead to avoidance, to distancing from others, and to creeping spiritual impotence. This is the danger we face in our own lives.

If you and I are to offer authentic forgiveness to each other, forgiveness that liberates us from the quicksand of bitterness and sets us free to love our neighbors—of whatever color or tribe—as we love ourselves, we are going to have to give them what they *need*, not what they *deserve*. Is this not the essence of the grace God has given to us? As Dr. Smedes put it, “When we forgive, we ride the crest of God’s cosmic wave. We walk in stride with God.” I’m challenged by Martin Luther King Jr.’s words a year before his death:

“We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. . . . Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win *you* in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.”¹

Let me close with this powerful prayer, found on a scrap of paper in one of the Nazi death camps. This is what real forgiveness looks like:

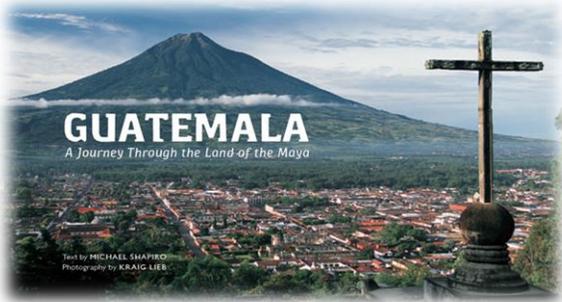
Lord, when you enter into your glory, do not remember only people of good will. Remember also those of ill will. Do not remember their cruelty and their violence. Instead, be mindful of

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Loving Your Enemies,” *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 40.

the fruit we bore because of what they did to us. Remember the patience of some and the courage of others. Recall the camaraderie, humility, fidelity, and greatness of soul which they awoke in us. **And grant, O Lord, that the fruit we bore may one day be their redemption.**²

Dave

POSTSCRIPTS:



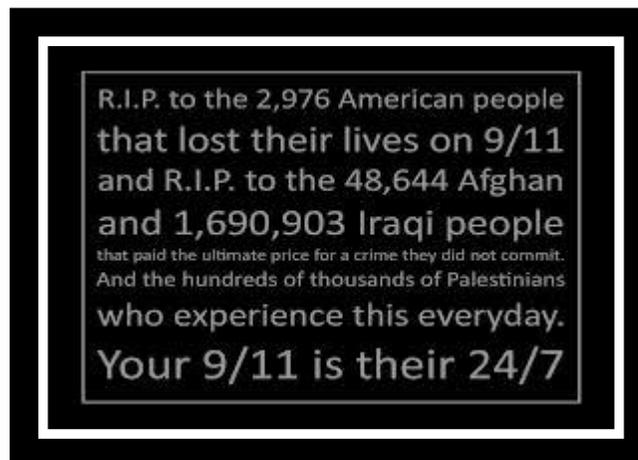
Please remember that Mark Wakefield will be our speaker this Sunday morning, telling us about his ministry to “lost boys” in the western mountains of Guatemala. I’ve known Mark since he was a teen, and he’s worth hearing!

And if hearing Mark, combined with our cooperative work with *Conexiones*, the Hispanic church we’re helping to start right here in Oakland Mills, stirs you to want to learn Spanish, here are two very

interesting websites that you might want to visit:

www.ted.com/talks/luis_von_ahn_massive_scale_online_collaboration.html
www.duolingo.com

(FYI, there are more Spanish speakers in the world than there are English speakers, and Hispanics are predicted to be the dominant people group in the U.S. within 50 years.)



² Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 87.