

Proper 19 Year A 2026

Like all of you, I remember where I was on September 11, 2001 when the world Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked by Al Qaeda terrorists. It was my first day of seminary. Yeah... Bad omen. I was driving from our home in West Austin to midtown where the seminary was located. I was topping a rise above the river that runs through town, wherefrom one could see the entire skyline of the city. I remember the sun in my eyes. Carl Castles was reading the AP wire on National Public Radio. It was just before 9:00 o'clock when he announced that a "commuter aircraft" had struck the north tower of the World Trade Center. I remember his voice sounding stoic, but uncertain, as if it were hard to believe what was written in front of him. Just seventeen minutes later, as I was entering the seminary parking lot, the second aircraft struck the south tower... Then we all knew.

We were to meet in the auditorium for a formal celebratory beginning of the semester, but instead, amid what felt like a rising panic, a television set was wheeled in, and we watched in disbelief the video footage of the crashes, and perhaps, just as horrible, the collapse of the two skyscrapers into rubble. The Dean of the seminary led us to the chapel where we prayed the Great Litany from the Book of Common Prayer: "From all evil and wickedness; from sin; from the

crafts and assaults of the devil; and from everlasting damnation, Good Lord deliver us”... we prayed.

We went home to Dothan over the thanksgiving holidays. One evening we had supper with my brother and his wife; and my former roommate and dear friend Tad who was married to my brother’s sister-in law. Our dinner Conversation was all about the events of September 11. Tad and Christin actually lived in New York City at the time, so they had a first-hand feel for the trauma. Tad had acquired the habit of reading each morning the New York Times running roster of the dead, still being found in the rubble. By Thanksgiving the United States had attacked Afghanistan for the purpose of countering the 9/11 attack. My friend Tad was all for the war; all for retaliation as the means of justice. As dinner plates were being removed, I made the statement that we, as a country, needed to confront the question as to why.... Why these terrorists attacked us in the first place. Tad took great offense, and it was a while before we spoke again.

Now, don’t get me wrong.... Acts of terror are evil.... But since the 9/11 attack I have felt that we, as a nation, have missed an opportunity for some serious self-examination. Why would anyone give their lives to kill spectacularly innocent people of another nation, seemingly, out of the blue? What about us

could evoke such an act of violence and hatred? What's the problem? Well, over the years I've thought a lot about that.... The problem, no surprise, dare I say it again... is empire. Though reprehensible, the attacks were symbolic. The twin towers of New York represented institutionalized capitalism (capitalism that feeds on debt), both American and global. The attack on the Pentagon, an indictment of American military hegemony in the Middle East, and across the world. The fourth plane was headed to Washington D.C. presumably aimed at the White House or the Capitol; a denunciation of a government whose guiding principle, since its beginning was self-interest. The attacks represented the anger and, one might say envy, against the so-called first world, the global North and West who possess the vast majority of the world's wealth and power. The United States alone has thirty five percent of the world's wealth. And in the United States, 75% of that wealth is held by 5% of the population. This disparity is nothing new. There has always been an intractable divide between the haves and the have nots, despite an abundance of resources. Suffice it to say that empire is not designed to serve a greater good; rather it serves the elite, the wealthy, the powerful. It serves itself.

Intractable, because the practice of empire over the millennia has been honed, systematized. There's a playbook, as it were. And the collateral damage of empire is not just about other countries' well-being, but that of its own citizens.

The United States, under Roosevelt, took a stab at bridling the growing disparity of wealth under American capitalism. Under the New Deal there were ways to share the wealth of a resource rich country... a progressive system of taxation; government sponsored employment; financial relief for the unemployed; the strengthening of Labor Unions. The legacy of the New Deal created Medicare and Medicaid; and unemployment insurance. The New Deal in the United States literally created the American middle class. Democracy and Socialism coexisted in a creative tension.... That system, since the early 1980's is being dismantled. And amid an unlearned and misinformed public discourse, Democratic Socialism has become a term of not creative progress, but derision. Capitalism, now enthroned by post-modern empire, has broken the guardrails of its naive ideology. Our elected representatives are owned by the corporate profit motive, and the elite who control it. Empire continues with a stony resilience; and the result is that many lives continue to be ruined, socially, economically, violently.... in a world that brims with sustainable abundance.

In today's reading from Matthew, Jesus tells the parable which the Editors of the Harper Collins Bible entitle, "the unforgiving servant." I would have called it the unforgiving system. The context of this parable, of course, is a people occupied by empire; a people living under an oppressive and violent system; a

system under which the vast majority of its population are poor... And when I say poor, I mean poor to the point of starvation. What we know of Jesus's entire preaching and teaching ministry has to be read in that context. At the heart of his teaching was the means of liberation from oppression.

This parable is about living lives of forgiveness; not just in light of interpersonal transgressions, but more particularly, it is about debt forgiveness. It was an ancient custom in Judaism to practice jubilee... every seven years debts were forgiven in deference to the well-being and dignity of the community... The practice recognized that debt over the long term, undermined relationships, created enmity among families and communities. In short, a system of debt was recognized as unsustainable as to the community's viability. Over the life of the people of Israel the practice disappeared. So Jesus here is teaching Torah; how shall we live with one another? We forgive not seven times, but seventy seven times... seven being a magic number in Judaism. Had he thought of it; he might have said, the kingdom of God is jubilee.

There are many commentators on this parable who equate the king with God, lording God's power over God's struggling people; micromanaging and tweaking their morality... So the moral of the story would be: We are to forgive as

God forgives... but that argument falls apart. The King, In this story, is coaxed into forgiveness, but changes his mind because of the slave's failure to forgive a debt owed him... and, we are told, that he goes on to torture the slave. No, the king is the king in this parable... and moreover, the king represents the failed system of empire... a system that is coercive and capricious... and violent; a system in which self-interest and greed are the modus operandi.... Some things never change.

Jesus introduces this parable by saying that the kingdom of God may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. The Greek word for compare, also means contrast. And what gives the meaning of the parable away is that the debt owed the king, we are told is 10,000 talents. One talent was a year's wage... so this 10,000 amount is unimaginable, impossible to repay. In fact, any Jewish hearer of this parable would know that the tribute required by Rome at their conquest of Judea in 60 B.C.E. was 10,000 talents. The problem is empire.

For Matthew, the realm of God stands in stark contrast to the world of empire. And we my sisters and brothers are first and forever citizens of God's realm; a realm of generosity and forbearance. Alas, Empire, I'm afraid to say, is here to stay in its unapologetic deceit; but we are witnesses to an alternative. We

serve the greater call to compassion, kindness, and justice. We are witnesses to whether or not God's gracious realm may exist at all. In other words, God needs us. We are all priests of possibility. That is the vocation of God's people, in every language and culture and religion... to make visible, believable the possibility of a just and sustainable world.... A world of shared abundance... a gracious community of equals. We can and should vote our conscience in our democracy to that end; but perhaps more importantly, we practice such a life where we are... so that people may see what is possible in God's mythic imagination. It's the "good people" who will shine the light of truth in the darkness. In our case, the good people are those who serve the Gospel of Christ... but there are others, good people, of other faith traditions, or of no faith tradition at all, who are witnesses as well... allies in this complicated and broken world; allies who proclaim that there is another way, a viable alternative whose authority is only Love.

My friends, we are jubilee people... people who share what we have for the good of the whole. The evil that so infects our world cannot stand against good people practicing the good. A world inured to debt, literal or figurative, has no future, only burden. God's world is about welcome, forgiveness, compassion,

justice, and freedom. Those are the rudiments of abundant life. Choose life, good people.... Choose life.