

**“9/11 at 15”**  
**Rev. Bill Freeman**  
**9/11/16**  
**Menifee United Church of Christ**

Two 9/11 conspiracy theorists die and go to heaven. They appear before God. The first man asks God, “God, please tell us – was 9/11 an act of the government?” The second man says, “Yes, God, please tell us. 9/11 was the act of the government, wasn’t it?” God sighs and rolls God’s eyes and says, “No, 9/11 was not the act of the government. 9/11 was the act of Al Qaida and Osama bin Laden.” The first man whispers to the second man, “Wow, this conspiracy goes higher up than even we thought.”

9/11 conspiracy theorists are a breed apart. One told me once that it wasn’t a plane that went into the Pentagon, it was a missile. You probably heard that. So I said, “OK, then please tell me where is Barbara Olson being held?” Barbara Olson was a conservative writer. She was on the plane going from DC to LA to be on Bill Maher’s show that night, on 9/11. Bill Maher had an empty chair on his set that night in honor of Barbara Olson. After her plane took off, Barbara Olson called her husband and left a message on his answering machine saying, “Our plane’s been hijacked. Tell me what to do.” That’s the last thing he heard from his wife. So, if that plane didn’t go into the Pentagon, I wish the 9/11 conspiracy theorists would tell me - where is the plane with all the passengers, including Barbara Olson? Is it on an island someplace, like in “Lost?” I don’t think so. As painful as it is, I think that plane went into the Pentagon. And the people on it, including Barbara Olson, were killed on 9/11.

9/11 changed my life. My birthday, as you heard, is 9/11. It was on my birthday in 2001, after seeing those planes fly into the World Trade Center and, yes, the Pentagon, and into a field in Pennsylvania, that I decided to pursue a path to pastoring, to one day preach love in a sometimes hateful world. I felt I was being called by God.

A year later, in the fall of 2002, I enrolled in a seminary. A conservative seminary. A liberal student in a conservative seminary. About a year after that we studied sacraments. We studied communion and baptism. And I knew I hadn’t been baptized. When I was a little baby they didn’t believe in baptism in the church my parents attended and I knew I wasn’t baptized as an adult. So I went to my teaching church pastor and I said, “I think if I’m going to be a Christian minister, I probably should be baptized.” And he very compassionately said, “Well, duh,” and agreed to baptize me that next Sunday. Well I woke up that Sunday and looked at the calendar and said, “Oh my goodness, it’s December 7th, Pearl Harbor Day!” Then a little more than a year later, my seminary classmates and I were assigned to preach our first sermon in chapel in seminary. Now the seminary said that the names were selected at random and we were all given dates at random, but I had my doubts, because the liberal student in a conservative seminary was assigned to preach his first sermon on April 1st, April Fool’s Day! So now I say that those three dates, my birthday 9/11, my baptism day December 7th, and the first sermon I preached in seminary, April Fool’s Day, mean that my ministry should always be about justice and peace and never taking myself too seriously.

Jesus seriously forgives everyone. Everyone. No matter what they’ve done. Which sometimes can be a difficult teaching to accept. Jesus in Luke chapter 15 was sitting with sinners and tax collectors. They followed him around. He eats with them. The scribes and Pharisees went berserk. “This man eats with sinners!” The scribes and Pharisees were the Religious Right of Jesus’s day. They were the believers in every word of the Bible. They took the Bible literally, but not always lovingly. They believed that the Bible is all about rules and regulations and not about forgiveness and love. So they went berserk when Jesus sat with tax collectors and sinners.

So Jesus told a little story. A parable. He said, “If you have a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, you’ll leave the 99 and go look for the lost sheep. And when you find it, you will rejoice! You’ll throw a party! Because what was lost has now been found.” It’s the same thing in the story of the prodigal son. When the prodigal son goes away, and comes back, and his father runs to him and hugs and kisses him, because he’s his son. His son doesn’t have to ask for forgiveness, he doesn’t have to repent. His father just hugs him, before he has a word to say about forgiveness or repentance. And that’s how Jesus is with everyone. Everyone. Even 9/11 terrorists? That might be a little difficult to accept. But I don’t read in the bible that Jesus has degrees of sins that he forgives or doesn’t forgive. He forgives that sin, but not this sin. Jesus forgives everyone, even though that might be difficult for us to accept. But some of Jesus’ teachings are difficult for us to accept.

President Bush went to Ground Zero a few days after 9/11. He had his arm around a firefighter, you may remember that. And he told the crowd that was gathered there, probably dozens, if not hundreds, of people, that we are going to go to war against the people who did this. President Bush said this to the people, including the firefighter. I wonder what the reaction would have been if President Bush had had his arm around Jesus, and as he’s saying that we’re essentially going to go to war against all these people who did this to us, I wonder what would have happened if Jesus had said, “Blessed are the peacemakers. Turn the other cheek. Forgive and you will be forgiven. If you live by the sword, you’ll die by the sword.” I wonder how long it would have taken President Bush to slowly remove his arm

from around Jesus and walk away. I wonder how long it would take for the people gathered there and the crowd watching, millions of people watching across the country, I wonder how long it would take for them to shout, "Crucify him!" Jesus' teaching is difficult to accept. Difficult to understand. But Jesus forgives everyone.

But that's really not the point of my sermon today. The point of my sermon is that if Jesus can forgive the 9/11 terrorists, and let's assume he does, how much easier is it for us to forgive those who have hurt us? How much easier is it for us to forgive those who have done evil to us, who have hurt us? Emotionally or spiritually or physically? How much easier is it for us to forgive those who've hurt the ones we love? Emotionally, spiritually, physically. Of course, we want those we forgive to change their ways.

The apostle Paul changed his ways. Paul, writing in 1 Timothy chapter 1, says that he was formerly "a man of violence." He's not anymore, but he was formerly a man of violence. He was Saul. We remember that Saul held the cloaks of those who murdered, martyred Stephen. He watched Stephen die. So we wonder, what other things did Saul do that were violent? He may not have stopped the violence, but that was not violent itself. So Paul, if he was formerly a man of violence, must have done other violent things, that may not be described in the Bible but must have taken place, because Christians feared Saul and hated Saul until Saul went on the road to Damascus, where Saul became Paul. And then Paul says that Jesus forgave him for his sins, for what he'd done wrong, for the mistakes he'd made in his life. And the message of course is that Jesus forgives us for whatever we've done and forgives others for what they've done to hurt people.

Adam Lanza hurt a lot of people. Adam Lanza reportedly shot and killed 26 people at an elementary school in Connecticut in 2012. I imagine that the loved ones of those killed, including 20 children could sure use our prayers today. Robert Louis Dear, Jr. hurt a lot of people. Robert Louis Dear, Jr. reportedly shot and killed 3 people at a Planned Parenthood in Colorado. I imagine that the loved ones of those who were killed could use our prayers today. Still. There's a lot of evil in the world. Evil lurks in people's hearts and we have to hope and pray that they'll change their ways. The way that Paul changed his ways. The way that David changed his ways.

David hurt people, but in Psalm 51 David seeks God's forgiveness, asks for God's mercy and steadfast love. David says that he sees before him all of the sins that he's committed and that God sees the evil that David committed. And we know what that is. That's David having an affair with Bathsheba and then directing her husband Uriah to the front in battle to make sure that he would die. And he did die. And David recognizes his sin now, realizes his evil. And he asks for God's forgiveness. He asks God to put a clean heart within him and he asks God to put a new and right spirit within him. How many of us would like God to put a clean heart in us? And put a new and right spirit within us? Or how many of us would like God to do that with others who maybe have hurt us, who hurt our loved ones, would put a new and right spirit in them. We all make mistakes.

Sister Helen Prejean knows that we all make mistakes sometimes. Sister Helen Prejean wrote the book "Dead Man Walking" about those on death row who have been convicted of committing heinous crimes. Susan Sarandon played Sister Helen in the movie "Dead Man Walking." Sister Helen writes that whatever we've done, we should not be defined by our worst act. We are more than the worst thing we've ever done. I hope all of us realize that. Whatever we've done in our lives, whatever mistakes we've made in our lives, whatever errors we've made in our lives, whatever wrongs we've done, that we're more than the worst thing we've ever done and that we, like everyone, are forgiven by Jesus, by God. We're forgiven. Because God has mercy on us.

Moses tells us that God has mercy on God's people. Eventually. Moses, writing in Exodus chapter 32, says that God has a feeling of wrath against God's people. Moses tells us that God wants to eliminate God's people, wants to crush them, wants to burn them, wants to destroy them. But Moses implores God not to do it. And God changes God's mind. This is in chapter 32. If anyone ever tells you that God never changes, Moses got God to change God's mind. And God did not destroy God's people.

Today many of us don't believe in a wrathful God, don't believe in a God that would destroy God's people, don't believe that God wants to kill us, don't believe that God is worse than any abusive parent, don't believe that God is worse than any murderer, don't believe that God is worse than any terrorist. Most of us today believe in a God of love. Because the Bible says, "God is love."

Brené Brown says we should love ourselves. Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston in the Graduate College of Social Work. Brené Brown wrote a book entitled "The Gift of Imperfection." Brené Brown writes that, yes, we make mistakes, but that doesn't mean we aren't worthy of love. We are worthy of love. And we should love ourselves. And I believe that we are worthy of God's love. I believe we are worthy of Jesus' love. I believe we are worthy of the Holy Spirit's love. And that's why we should love ourselves. That's why we should love others. That's why we should love God. Because God first loved us. Because God created us in God's image. God blessed us. And God loves us. Whoever we are and whatever we've done. God loves us, even if we're 9/11 conspiracy theorists.

Let us pray:  
God of love,  
Help us to love you.  
Help us to love others.  
And help us to love ourselves.  
Now and forever more,  
By the power of the Holy Spirit  
And in the name of Jesus.  
Amen.

*(This sermon was delivered without manuscript or notes,  
and was transcribed from a tape recording of it.)*