

The last few days have been loaded with feelings, for sure. The back end of this week brought with it some emotional whiplash, from the peak joy of Wednesday evening's wonderful liturgy, to the waves of deep grief that washed in on Friday as this country marked 25 years since the devastating attacks that took place on September 11, 2001.

I'm sure everyone in this room has their own story of that day.

There's certainly much we all shared – shock, fear, grief, overwhelming sadness at the tragedy that was unfolding, uncertainty about what the future might now hold, difficulty making sense of what had happened. Assumptions of safety were ripped away; it was disorienting, not knowing who was behind the attacks and what might still be coming.

A lot of people got to experience a deep sense of togetherness, of community, of living through something significant together. There were incredible acts of heroism and selflessness, sacrifices made to save the lives of complete strangers, in many ways, amidst the horror, we would witness some of the very best of humanity.

But this wasn't everyone's experience. For many, the days, weeks and months after 9/11 were very dangerous. Ordinary folks' lives were at risk. There was a desperate need for someone to blame, someone to punish. And so there was violence; violence towards Muslim, Seikh, and Arab neighbors – hyper-local attempts at some kind of justified retribution, attacks, racist attacks, on anyone considered to be a valid stand-in for the actual, mysterious, murderous terrorists who were actually responsible.

We're living in a country today, in a world really, shaped by the events of 9/11. For many the lived experience of that horrendous day and the days that followed changed the entire trajectory of their lives; and for this country, it ushered in a new era of suspicion, distrust, war, and governmental measures that have, 25 years later, resulted in brutal and sometimes lethal responses to asylum seekers, immigrants, and citizens.

Despite the very many ways all our hearts cracked open as we lived through those days in 2001 together, nothing really changed. As a nation, we stormed straight back into the cycle of retributive violence with gusto – attempting to force peace through the wielding of power, force peace through the fear of ongoing violence and vengeance.

And this is always an option for us humans, the history of humanity, our own lived experience, and the current state of the world tell the story of how invested we are still in revenge, in retribution. That “justice” makes violence in response to violence necessary.

But this is not the Way of Jesus.

And we might know that, but what about when something really bad has happened, surely then our violent retaliation is justified, necessary even to stop something harrowing and horrendous ever happening again?

This is not a new conundrum. Harrowing and horrendous violences of all kinds have been cycling for millennia.

So it's surely significant that this conundrum, of whether or when violence might truly be justified, doesn't come up in any of Jesus' conversations with his disciples recorded in our Gospel texts. Even though the question would have loomed large, as it does today.

Peter doesn't ask Jesus how they should respond to the violence of their time: the violence of the Empire, or of the kings put in place to govern the region they lived in, he doesn't ask whether they should be supportive of the zealots or whether the violence of the sicarii is justified – instead their conversations are about their own lives, which tells us that's where our guidance is found.

In today's Gospel reading and throughout the Gospel texts, Jesus makes clear the absolute importance of forgiveness. Forgiveness is to be a way of life for all those who choose to follow him.

But how can we possibly be expected to forgive the unforgivable?

Forgiveness isn't the same as forgetting; it's not the same as tolerating or accepting wrongs done to us. Forgiveness isn't a mandate to be in relationship, it's not a requirement to be in any relationship that's harmful, dangerous, or abusive. Forgiveness doesn't mean we naively say to an attacker, or an abuser, or to the one who's wounded us, *it's ok, we're all good*.

Forgiveness isn't about letting a perpetrator off the hook.

Forgiveness is for us, for our own healing, our own hearts and minds.

And our own healed/healing hearts and minds are crucial because "we" are the world we live in.

Forgiveness changes us.

Forgiveness is the setting down of resentment, the setting down of bitterness and hate that will impact and distort our thinking and our doing.

Holding on to an unrelenting need for revenge or retribution is a torment that piles right on top of the original hurt, heaps on top of the original wounding. It's agonizing. And a violent response sometimes feels like the only thing that will bring relief.

Forgiveness is bound to love. Forgiveness is a state of our interiority. It recognizes that wounded people wound, suffering people cause suffering. Forgiveness acknowledges harms, acknowledges the need for accountability and what may or may not be possible to restore relationship, and it also says, insists, **my woundedness, my hurt, will not become the source of someone else's suffering, I will not become the source of someone else's suffering.**

The cycle of violence has to be broken if there's to be change. Forgiveness is what breaks it.

But what about the people who have done such terrible things they deserve to be punished, deserve what's coming, deserve to be hated – What about them? Justice needs to be served. How can there possibly be forgiveness?

Forgiveness is for us, it's not for the one who has harmed, or wounded. Forgiveness doesn't deny the need for justice or the importance of accountability, we've got to separate those things.

Forgiveness is for us, so that we might be changed, and our lived responses to those who hurt us, what we say, what we do in response, it'll no longer play a role in keeping the cycle of violence, the cycle of reciprocal harm fueled and very much present in the world.

We're not called to change the whole world, we're called to change our own lives. By prayer and by practice, we're being lead by Christ into the freedom that's offered to us through our forgiveness of others. Prayer and practice, we don't do this alone. Forgiveness is a spiritual discipline that will set us free.

And so, really, it comes down to trust, to faith. Do we trust ourselves, our habits of thought and action, our leaders, our armies – do we trust violence, clapping back, giving them what they deserve? Has violence of speech or action in our own lives ever brought us peace beyond the briefest moment of self-satisfaction? It's certainly never brought a lasting peace to this broken world.

Do we trust what we've always done, or do we trust the way Jesus tells us live.

Jesus has given us a Way, a Way where there seems to be no other way than the old violent way – will we trust it? Will we choose it? The future we co-create is our choice, the way we respond to the folks we share this life with, especially those “who sin against us,” is our choice.

Jesus calls us always to choose life in all its fullness, choose to follow him into freedom.

We can't know where this Way will lead, and we do know it doesn't mean an end to our suffering, but Jesus' way is the way of life and peace; and Jesus makes it clear that forgiveness is an obligation, and if we ignore that obligation the consequences will be dire, as they always have been.

With what happened on 9/11 once again fresh in our minds, let's examine our own hearts – who do we still need to forgive?