Gracious God, there’s not one of us here who’s not borne a grudge or kept and old hurt stored on the shelf of memory. May we hear your words calling us to forgive, hear them both as the daunting challenge and the liberating possibility they are. Comfort us by them, and discomfort us by them; forgive us, and teach us to forgive. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Let me begin with a story about forgiveness that’s found its way into many a sermon on the topic. I don’t think I like the story, which is why I’m telling it to you. Andrew Lang was a celebrated Scottish man of letters from the Victorian era. A poet, novelist, folklorist and literary critic, Lang once published a very kind review of a book by a new young author. Not long afterward, this same young writer repaid him for his generous words with a bitter and insulting attack on Lang. Three years later, Lang was staying with his friend Robert Bridges, then poet laureate of Scotland. One day Bridges noticed that Lang was actually reading a book by the same young man who had so mercilessly excoricated him. Bridges said to Lang, “Why, that is another book by that young cub who behaved so shamelessly to you.” To his astonishment, Bridges discovered that Lang had totally forgotten the insult. Bridges said this of the incident, “To forgive was the sign of a great man, but to forget was sublime.”

I’m not so sure… “Forgive and forget” – so goes the shopworn cliché. I’m just not so sure. I know that forgiving and forgetting are not the same thing. And I’m not at all sure that forgetting, as Bridges suggested of Andrew Lang, is a loftier virtue than forgiving. In fact, I think when we forgive, we sometimes need

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remember.

Last Thursday night, I watched as much as I could handle of a History Channel program on the 102 minutes between the moment the first tower of the World Trade Center was hit and the moment the second tower came down. The documentary was nothing but film footage shot in those 102 minutes – no commentary, none needed. It was painful to watch, but I did. In part, I watched in order to remember. I watched in order to not forget.

Many a firehouse in New York has a plaque with photos of firemen lost that day, usually inscribed with the words, “We will never forget.” And we shouldn’t. Yad Vashem, the holocaust museum in Jerusalem, was built for the primary purpose of remembering, not forgetting. And the world should not forget – not ever. A nation may forgive the past, but it dare not forget history. And just so, on a personal you-and-me level, though we are called to forgive even if the hurt is deep, we should not necessarily forget. You can forgive a person you once loved, someone who perhaps betrayed you, but at the same time you might need to remember, to remember that you simply can’t be to them as you once were. You can forgive somebody you did business with, someone who did you wrong, yet you do need to remember you might not want to work them again.

That conversation Jesus has with Peter and the subsequent parable that Gracey read from the 18th Chapter of Matthew’s Gospel is about the non-negotiable necessity of forgiveness. But it’s not about forgetting. Peter, that proverbially hot-headed disciple, asks Jesus how many times he should forgive somebody. Peter goes so far as to suggest what he doubtless thought an outlandishly generous answer – “seven times?” There may have been a first-century rabbinical school of thought that said you had to forgive somebody seven times. After that, forget it. But Jesus says no, not seven times, seventy-seven times. An utterly unrealistic, impossible number, a veritable infinity of indulgence.

Jesus then unpacks his numerical answer with a parable about money, indebtedness, and debts forgiven. Finance and real estate are favorite metaphors of Jesus, by the way. It’s a simple enough tale: There’s a fellow – “a slave” the story says – who owes his king a fortune: ten thousand talents, an immense sum of

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money. The note comes due and he can’t pay up. This deep-in-debt slave pleads mercy; the king totally forgives his debt right on the spot. On his way out of the door, dancing down the palace steps, this financially liberated slave bumps into another slave who owns him maybe twenty bucks and he has the cheek to demand immediate payment. Slave two begs indulgence just like slave one had received ten minutes earlier. Oblivious to the incongruity, slave one says “no” and has slave two tossed into debtors’ prison. The moral misalignment of all this may be lost on slave number one, but it’s not lost on the folks who watch the scene unfold on the palace steps. They turn the thankless slug into the king, who is, as you might guess, furious. The king has slave one dragged back into the palace, and suggests that some hard time may be in order after all. This is all hyperbolic exaggeration to drive the point home – we are called to forgive others as God forgives us.

Both Old and New Testament are riddled with forgiveness. Like veins in marble, forgiveness runs through Scripture. The late David Noel Freedman was the kind of Bible scholar who could recite entire chapters from memory – in Hebrew. Born in New York City, raised in a Jewish home, Freedman later became a Presbyterian minister. He always had one theological foot in Judaism and the other in Christianity. Anyway, a friend of mine said she once asked Freedman, “David, if you had to sum up the whole Bible in one sentence, what would it be?” Freedman thought for a moment and answered with these words, “There is forgiveness.”

In Scripture, this forgiveness cuts in two directions. It runs down vertically, as it were, from God to us. In today’s Bible story, it moves vertically from merciful king to slave number one. And then, in place after place in scripture, forgiveness splinters out horizontally – or at it least it ought to splinter out horizontally – from one forgiven person to another. Sometimes it does, and sometimes it doesn’t, as in today’s parable. Jesus’ point is that forgiveness should cut two ways.

Jesus also tied these two vectors together when he taught us to pray, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” That phrase, by the way, is echoed three times in today’s service of worship – in the Lord’s Prayer itself, in the second hymn we sang, and in the Confession of Faith we’ll rise to speak after this sermon.
The unavoidable implication of both the prayer and today’s Bible reading is that the experience of being forgiven ought to empower you to forgive others. But, please note, it says nothing about forgetting.

So how do you walk this existential tightrope – forgiving but not necessarily forgetting? I think you find the balance point when you grasp that both forgiveness and remembering are best oriented to the future, not the past. Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa fought the brutality of that nation’s apartheid regime for most of his life. He was tried on trumped-up charges in kangaroo courts and spent years in jail. After apartheid ended, he was appointed to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation commission, a panel that labored through the horrific details of atrocities, false arrests and summary executions. But even after all this, Tutu summed up what had to happen next in six tough words. “There is no future without forgiveness.”

As a pastor, I’ve so often sat with members of my congregation who’ve been deeply hurt by someone – a parent, a spouse, an ex, a child, a friend. Sometimes, even when the hurt is old, they’re still carrying it around like a fetid emotional albatross about the neck. Forgiveness, I try to remind them, is not so much a gift to the person who wronged you; it is more a gift to yourself. To forgive is to choose not to carry that emotional weight into your future. Presbyterian novelist Fred Buechner – whom I quote rather too often – put it like this: “When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you’re spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride.” Bitterness and wounded pride do corrode the future. This is true for nations and it’s true for you and me. Forgiveness liberates; forgiveness opens the future. It may sometimes liberate those we forgive, but more often it liberates those who do the forgiving.

And – ironically – remembering should also be oriented toward the future more than the past. To paraphrase Tutu, “There is no future without remembering”– remembering even pain and betrayal, remembering even disappointments and deceptions. We cannot understand who we are and we can never know who we might become without remembering our history – both personal history and common history. We remember because memory teaches us; remembering makes us wiser. We remember 9-11 not to hang on to the hot coal of anger, but so that we
might chart as wise course as possible into our world’s fragile and dangerous future. Yad Vashem remembers the holocaust not to keep bitterness alive, but so that the world might do everything possible to forestall such horror in the future.

And our individual call, Jesus’ invitation to you and to me, is to forgive, in time always to forgive, but also to remember when we must –
   to remember without hatred,
   to remember without retribution,
   to remember for the sake of tomorrow.

I’d like to rephrase those words of Scots poet Robert Bridges I quoted at the beginning of this sermon. Bridges, you’ll recall, saw his friend Andrew Lang reading a book by a young author who had hurt him badly, an offence that Lang seemed to have utterly forgotten. Bridges said of Lang, “To forgive was the sign of a great man, but to forget was sublime.” I would rather he’d said, “To forgive is the sign of a great man, but to remember without bitterness is sublime.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.