Forgiveness? Now?

by Donald W. Shriver in the October 24, 2001 issue

On September 11, a Presbyterian friend was visiting a Lakota community in South Dakota. Later she told about her experience in her church newsletter: “We had already learned enough of Sioux history so that, on that fateful Tuesday morning when the World Trade Center was hit, we couldn’t help but relate to the Sioux rage and frustration at broken treaties, massacred women and children, and sacred land usurped.”

My friend is too wise a Christian to suggest that the September 11 atrocity was a just punishment for America’s sins, internal and external. But her ability to combine horror at the crimes of America’s new enemies with repentance for crimes in our national history is striking. Most Americans are not ready for sustained reflection on that combination. One hopes that time for such reflection will come—time for sorting out the just from the unjust accusations against America promulgated by Osama bin Laden and his cohorts.

For the moment, however, American church leaders are having to wrestle, at a new depth, with a familiar pastoral dilemma: Does moral judgment have any place in ministry to grief? On September 29, I participated in a memorial service for a man of 26 whose body must be among the thousands buried in the New York rubble. He was an able, dedicated bank stock researcher. Would any pastor of compassionate mind dare to muse, in that service, on the possible sins of world capitalism against the poor people of the world? What an untimely, cruel proposal—like blaming the victim.

To be sure, this event tests our American Christian ability to demonstrate moral judgment without an instinct for revenge, an empathy for our enemies without sympathy for their crimes, and a hope that we can eventually find ways to reconcile with them. This complex combination amounts to a definition of forgiveness. We should be devoting a lot of time and energy to coping with the complexities of forgiveness as they relate to our immediate and long-term relation to the world of Islam.

But in the midst of this crisis, we can also talk about forgiveness prematurely. Some years ago, a young man of 13 murdered a young man of 16 as the latter was coming out of the Corpus Christi Catholic Church. The father of the victim was a practicing Catholic and a parole officer. After the funeral service, he said to a reporter, “My faith in religion is one of forgiveness, turn the other cheek. . . . It’s what one has to do as a Christian, but it’s not easy to do.” I remember admiring this man’s simultaneous struggle with grief and his duty to forgive. But I could not help thinking that the church that had taught him the centrality of forgiveness should relieve him of that obligation for the time being. Grief must have its day—or its year. Moral outrage too. And a struggle against the natural precipitate of rage infused with grief: hatred.

Islamic theologians make a distinction between the “greater” and the “lesser” jihad. The Arabic word means “struggle,” and contrary to what non-Muslims might assume, the lesser struggle is the external, sometimes militant one. The greater struggle is the internal effort to conform oneself to the will of God. Speaking as one New Yorker and one Christian among many, I am aware that in this current national crisis I have to struggle to relate my grief and anger to my potential for hate. Perhaps I am confessing that this theologian needs pastoral care. My guess is that we all need it. We are not likely to respond favorably to sermons that tell us that we should leap to forgiveness of our enemies while they are still intending, in the next round of terror, to kill Americans for being American. Why should we even speak of forgiveness while an enemy shows no disposition to discontinue threatening our lives or to repent of doing so? Nor can we accommodate, just now, too heavy a burden of call to nation repentance for our undoubted sins against too many of the world’s poor.

Were we to postpone indefinitely all thought of forgiveness or repentance, we would be abandoning our commission to live and act as a people of faith in a world where we are supposed to be salt and light. But a resistance to hate has to rank very high in the inmost depths of our souls as a current spiritual priority. Hiding inside of us is a capacity for hate that only those with no resonance for Romans 7 will deny.

I am old enough to remember mass-death warfare beginning with Guernica and proceeding to London, Hamburg, Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As a young American, I was not especially troubled at the thought that we had to kill hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians to protect Americans. Even without benefit of the just war theory, as a Christian I should have been troubled. The hatred of an Osama bin Laden for Americans is laced with contempt for Americans and our ways of life.

To that contempt I am tempted to explode in countercontempt: Who are you to gloat over the bodies of my New York neighbors buried beneath that rubble?

For the moment, relatives of those buried people are preoccupied with grief, and they must be given much time and space for grieving. What worries me is that, once a second and third atrocity occur somewhere in the United States, our collective grief and anger will turn into waves of hatred and increasing impatience with the principle of discrimination between military and civilian targets in the Islamic world. The same waves can overwhelm our patient listening and response to the cry of the world's poor for daily bread. Our national leaders are aware of the starvation that stalks Afghans as winter approaches. But after the next terrorist attack? Will our defense budget be written in blank checks, and our already shrunken foreign-aid budget shrink to nothing? May God deliver us from that temptation.

I cannot speak for other American Christians, but I for one find myself praying the Lord's Prayer with new fear and trembling. The exclamation "My God!" had entered so pervasively into common popular talk in this country that Americans had forgotten that the words are a first-person address. On September 11, New Yorkers remembered. People prayed that day in their own stumbling ways. Some of us prayed the Lord's Prayer. I like what A. B. Bruce wrote many years ago: "The Lord's Prayer is not merely for heroes, but for the timid, the inexperienced. The teacher is considerate, and allows time for reaching the heights of heroism."

So it is with me. I need, in particular, the petitions for forgiveness and deliverance from evil—including the temptation to return evil for evil. If you will so deliver me, Lord, I may learn again to forgive as I am forgiven.

And for climbing toward that height of spiritual heroism, Lord, I need some time.