

# David W. Lloyd: Recommitting to Our Master in a Post-9/11 World

A Sermon by David Lloyd  
Seekers Church  
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## Recommitting to Our Master in a Post-9/11 World

Today is the day that we remember the Al Qaeda terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and on the Pentagon and the heroic self-sacrifice of the passengers on a fourth flight that prevented an attack on another Washington target. Moreover, it is a day that we can also remember the Al Qaeda attacks on the members of the U.S. Air Force in the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, and on the sailors of the U.S. Navy on the USS Cole in Yemen, and on the U.S. embassies in Africa.

[I spoke several years ago](#) about my direct experiences with the events of September 11, so I will not mention them again today. I carry the memories of September 11 in my heart. I cannot let them go. I carry them in part because, at least monthly, I go into the part of the Pentagon where the plane crashed, and every time I do, I think about the deaths and the trauma to their family members and to the survivors. I carry these memories in part because every time someone forgetfully leaves a briefcase or box in the Pentagon Metro station or in the Pentagon itself, I get a pop-up on my computer screen alerting me to the situation and a second pop-up when the all clear is sounded. I carry these memories in part because every

time there is a flyover ceremony at a funeral at Arlington National Cemetery, I get a pop-up so that I will not think that another attack is underway. Moreover, I carry these memories at federal interagency meetings on assistance to victims of federal crimes, and we talk about assisting victims of international terrorism. My carrying of these memories is my own memorial to those victims of September 11.

You carry your own memories of that day, and maybe you will share them during the reflection time or during the coffee hour.

The lectionary scriptures for today are an interesting collection of scripture. The Hebrew scripture is the account of God's drowning of the Egyptian army at the Red Sea during the Israelites' escape into the Sinai desert, the Israelites thankfulness at their deliverance, and then their praise and awe at the mighty power of God exerted on their behalf.

The Gospel is a commandment to forgive seventy times seven even when the person continues to do you wrong, combined with a story of a person who is forgiven but who refuses to forgive.

The excerpt from Paul's epistle to the church in Rome is an earnest appeal to Christians to tolerate each other's differences so that we can build up the body of Christ.

One theme that ties these scriptures together is the sovereignty and saving power of God. The story of the Exodus from Egypt is really a story about who is truly master – Pharaoh or the God of the Israelites. When one reads Moses' series of encounters with the Pharaoh carefully in the book of Exodus one sees that God was in control of the whole thing. It was God who called Moses to lead his people into freedom, and the text says that it was God who hardened the Pharaoh's heart against letting the people go each time that Moses had an audience with the Pharaoh. This miracle of the Pharaoh's army

drowning in the sea is the final chapter of that story – Pharaoh, the symbol of Egyptian power, was no match for the God of the Israelites. The Israelites saw the results of God's great power when it was unleashed against Egypt to save the people he had chosen, and they all feared the Lord. They put their faith in the Lord and in Moses, the servant of God.

The alternate Hebrew scripture passage is set in an earlier time, the time of Joseph and his brothers in Egypt. His brothers, who sold their obnoxious brother into slavery to get rid of his arrogant airs, came to Egypt to escape the famine in Canaan. Joseph, by now no longer a slave but a trusted advisor to the Pharaoh, recognized them, and after indulging in some mind games with them, revealed his identity. He invited them to bring their father, Jacob, a.k.a. Israel, to Egypt and settle permanently. When their father died, the brothers feared that Joseph would take his revenge on them for their earlier cruelty towards him, and they pleaded for forgiveness. Joseph was moved by this, and he responded, "Am I God? You meant to do me harm but God used that to bring good out of it and to save the lives of many people. Do not be afraid." In other words, God is not bound by the evil we do to one another, but transcends that evil and has saving power over it.

In Jesus' time, an offender seeking forgiveness did three things: recognized his or her covenant relationship with God, made an act of sacrifice, and repented – that is, changed his or her behavior. The rabbinical teaching was that a person who had fulfilled this could request forgiveness, and the person offended against should forgive seven times. Peter posed a further question to Jesus – if his brother keeps on wronging him, in other words, if the brother has not made a true repentance, how many times must Peter forgive him. In his parable about the unforgiving servant, Jesus reminded his disciples that we are God's servants, God has forgiven us and we should emulate that forgiveness towards our fellow

servants.

For some in this congregation, forgiving as Jesus taught would mean forgiving our parents or other adults for having abused us when we were children even as they are unable to admit to or seek forgiveness for what they did. For others it means forgiving another Seeker for something that he or she said or did that we may have never even confronted them about. For others in Seekers, it means forgiving the Republican Party and the Supreme Court for installing George Bush as winner of the 2000 election. For still others it means forgiving the architects of this dreadful war in Iraq. Most recently, it means forgiving those who failed to meet their responsibilities to prepare adequately and respond quickly if a major hurricane hit New Orleans.

Years ago through the National Organization for Victim Assistance – NOVA– I got to know a woman named Betty Jane Spencer. Betty Jane was a farmer's wife in Indiana, the proud mother of four teenage and young adult sons. One day, while her husband was not yet home, two thugs broke into their home, lined Betty Jane and her sons on the floor, and cold bloodedly shot them in the head because they wanted to see what it was like to kill someone. Somehow, she survived. In addition to the loss of her sons, and ultimately, the loss of her marriage, she survived the members of her little country church telling her that she had to forgive these killers seventy times seven. Over the years, the killers never sought forgiveness; instead, they kept filing appeals and habeas corpus petitions to be released from prison.

At one NOVA conference, there was a workshop on spiritual issues of crime victims. It was one of the most intense spiritual experiences of my life. Everyone in the room was either a survivor of violent crime or a person who worked with survivors of violent crime. The Spirit was at work as survivors shared their feelings of guilt and spiritual inadequacy and their exclusion from their congregations

because of their inability to forgive those who had committed such evil and caused great suffering. A community formed in that room not unlike the multitude that thronged around Jesus looking for healing. Finally, two pastors dared to contradict Jesus' response to Peter, and cited standard psychological teaching to say that one cannot forgive when the other has not requested forgiveness. There was a sense of relief and a feeling of being acceptable in God's eyes. I daresay it was healing. Yet, it was not Jesus' message.

It is my understanding that Betty Jane had not forgiven her sons' killers when she died. I know that I would not have forgiven them either. I have spent my professional career working on behalf of abused children and now working on behalf of survivors of domestic violence. I have heard more than enough denials, rationalizations and minimizations from those who have committed such violence and sexual abuse and emotional abuse. I do not remember many occasions where the perpetrator asked for forgiveness or even hearing about them. I struggle with Jesus' teaching, and I recognize that I may not share fully in God's forgiveness as a result.

Then there is Paul's letter to the little congregation of Christians in Rome. Paul keeps pointing out that we are all servants of Christ, so that we have no business telling each other where the other has been spiritually unworthy, or to look down our noses at each other. Christ our Lord will empower each of his flock to be spiritually worthy.

Hearing that we are all under God's power is hard for us. Moreover, hearing that we are Christ's servants is even harder. We are 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans. We are egalitarian. We do not have kings, queens, emperors and empresses; we elect our rulers. We do not have servants and slaves and we certainly do not have anyone as our master or mistress over us. Not even Christ. In my experience, even conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists rarely call themselves

servants of Christ. Instead, they call themselves Christians or followers of Christ. The usual question they pose to another person is, "Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Saviour?" and not "Have you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Master?"

This reluctance to accept the Lordship of Christ over us may be an issue in Seekers Church. From time to time, someone offers a confessional prayer about his or her difficulty with accepting authority, and occasionally this difficulty with accepting authority is acknowledged in someone's sermon. When we talk about being servants to each other we do not seem to mean total subservience on a 24/7 basis, but rather on a task-by-task basis. In my opinion, it is rare to find the terms "Lord" or "Master" in our liturgies or hymns. Celebration Circle tells me that this is because some of you have had bad experiences in other churches with authority, and because of our congregational consciousness about feminism and the paucity of the English language, and you have made your desires known to Celebration Circle.

The truth of the matter is, no matter how we feel about it, if we as members of Seekers Church are the embodied Body of Christ, then Christ is our master and we are his servants. That is what commitment to this congregation means – it is always a fundamental commitment to serving the Lord, who loved us first, from the beginning and who served us to the point of death. It is not a commitment to the congregation but to our Lord and Master. The membership commitment of the Church of the Saviour, the church that set our tradition, read, "I unreservedly and with abandon commit my life and destiny to Christ."

It takes courage to commit to being a servant of God. It takes courage to surrender our will to God's will for our lives. It takes courage to keep faithful to a call that has become dangerous, or more frequently, has become challenging and frustrating, or still more frequently, has become boring and

tedious. It takes courage to persevere, not out of stubborn doggedness but out of hope when there is no reason to hope. I wish our Seekers membership commitment said more about the courage of commitment needed to be a servant of God, so that we would be annually reminded that commitment is not for sissies. In addition, I wish our commitment said more about our hope.

These scriptures pose several challenging questions for us as a congregation and as individuals. I recommend that we reflect on them during this season of recommitment and attempt to answer them seriously and honestly, even if that requires a lot of courage.

First, from the scripture about the drowning of Pharaoh's army: Do we believe that God brings deliverance today to some people through the suffering and/or violent death of other people? As we remember the awful events of four years ago, we remember that passengers on the fourth jet airplane chose to muster what force they could to stop the hijackers from crashing that jet into some target here in Washington. Their decision resulted in the plane crashing into a field in Pennsylvania, killing not only all of the terrorists but also all of the passengers and crew. Was that terrible cost God's way of bringing deliverance to us?

From the scriptures of Joseph and his brothers: Do we believe that God's love is more powerful than the evil that we do? How does God redeem acts of evil, acts of cruelty that cause suffering? Does he use human acts of force? How do we know that human violence will be or is being redeemed by God, and that we are not just hearing selfish justifications and rationalizations for our own personal or national interests?

Is the threat of the use of force, such as those armed National Guard members guarding the streets of New Orleans, being used by God for God's own redemptive purposes? Is the actual use of force, such as our nation's use of nuclear

weapons against Japan – the only time nuclear weapons have been used (**so far**) – redeemable by God?

Every year on the Sunday closest to Memorial Day, I am struck anew by how many congregations, including this one, fail to use that holiday as an opportunity to wrestle with these questions. Memorial Day was created to honor the dead of the Civil War. Although he was not a theologian, Abraham Lincoln said in his Second Inaugural Address

*The Almighty has His own purpose. "Woe unto the world because of offenses! For it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war, as the woe to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him?*

Read it for yourself on the wall of the Lincoln Memorial.

Regarding Jesus' teaching of forgiveness: Do we believe that we should forgive even if the other person, organization or nation continues to wrong us, without repenting? On the other hand, do we believe that we should wait to offer it only when the other truly repents?

Have you forgiven Al Qaeda for the attacks on innocent people four years ago? Are we ready as a congregation to do this?

Finally, the questions raised by Paul's letter: Do we believe that we belong to Christ and that our brother and sister in Christ, with whom we frequently so strongly disagree, also belong to Christ?

Are we committed to Christ's Lordship, or are we independent



little searchers after spiritual fulfillment, wanting to belong to a group of people but without having to give our lives and destinies over to the One who died for us?

How do we treat those of us are weaker in our faith, those of us who don't seem fully committed, or who cannot forgive as Jesus forgave, or who cannot bring ourselves to seek forgiveness when we have wronged another, or who question whether God is truly bringing deliverance out of the acts of evil humans do? Do we cease judging each other, or do we place obstacles in each other's way?

Perhaps the most fitting memorial we can give to the victims and survivors of the 9-11 attacks, and the best preparation for recommitment, is to find the courage to take these questions seriously.