Here’s a question for you:

Do you think it would be a good thing to forgive those 19 men who visited on us the terror of Sept. 11, 2001?

Last Monday was the 16th anniversary of that vicious attack. It took nearly 3,000 lives in New York, Washington, D.C., and rural Pennsylvania. Odd, isn’t it, that we are presented with readings today that are so insistent on forgiveness shortly after that anniversary.

There’s a part of me that wants to say about those 19 guys, “May they rot in hell!!”

There’s also a part of me that thinks forgiveness is for wimps. You let them get away with that kind of stuff and soon the terrorists will take over the world.

I saw a photo of a 9/11 remembrance showing someone with a shirt that said "Never forgive, Never forget." There’s that part of me that says, “I’ll forgive, but I’ll never forget.”

In the Gospel, Peter asks this question:
When another member of the Church does me wrong again and again just how often am I expected to forgive?

Jesus does something in the Gospel that is very clever. He really turns Peter’s question on its head.

The story Jesus creates is almost absurd. It’s about this guy who works for a king who must be about the richest person in the world. This worker helped manage the king’s money and he somehow loses an unimaginable amount of it. The Greek words imply something like the whole national debt.

When the king finds this out, things get ugly.
The guy ends up begging the king to give him time to straighten things out. Amazingly, the king does more than that. He wipes out the whole debt.

Now you know the story.
This guy who is now off the hook
    turns around and refuses to act in a similar way
    to a fellow worker who owes him a tiny fraction of what he owed.

Looking at that, most of us would say, “That’s pretty stupid!”
Jesus looks at Peter and at us at that point
    and in some sense says,
“Never forget what it’s like to be in the shoes
    of somebody who has really messed up badly
    because every single one of you has messed up very badly.
And amazingly you are here to tell about it.
A wrathful God would have wiped you out long ago.”

Forgiveness is not about being soft on wrongdoing.
Of course, those who do wrong need to be held accountable.
Being held accountable and forgiveness need not be mutually exclusive.

The refusal to forgive is especially unhealthy and damaging for the person withholding forgiveness.
That is what Jesus seems to be focused on in this parable.

Forgiveness starts with remembering what it’s like to be the one caught with a hand in the cookie jar.
When I’m the one caught really messing up,
    I can always think of a thousand reasons why I should be forgiven.

When I fail to see the wrong-doer – whether an individual or a group – from that vantage point, then I begin to get in trouble.

I hang on to things like bitterness, anger, resentment, hatred, indignation, the desire for revenge.
And as much as anything else,
    when I cling to all that I’m hurting myself.
Then the hurt ripples out to a wider and wider circle of people.
A few years ago, I read a book called
*God’s Politics, A New Vision For Faith and Politics in America.*
In the introduction, Jim Wallis, that author, says this:

“Abraham Lincoln had it right [remember he was a Republican].
Our task should not be to invoke religion and the name of God
by claiming God’s blessing and endorsement
for all our national policies and practices
— saying, in effect, that God is on our side.
Rather, Lincoln said, we should pray and worry earnestly
*whether we are on God’s side.*”

That’s the kind of attitude of a person who knows what it’s like
to be caught with a hand in the cookie jar.

So, let’s return to my original question.
Do you think it would be good to *forgive* those 19 men
who visited the terror of 9/11/2001 on us?
I suspect that’s a question Jesus may want us to grapple with mightily
both alone and together.