

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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“I want to hear a sermon about forgiveness”

I have found that requests for sermons on forgiveness usually are about the big question of “how can I possibly forgive them for what they did”, and that gives us a clue about what needs to be done to forgive. So, at the end of today’s sermon we will pray for God’s help in doing the work of forgiveness. And at the top of this sermon, I want you to know that, besides many mature-in-the-Lord lay-members, all of the priests associated with this parish are ready and prepared to assist you in being able to forgive, as well as in helping you receive forgiveness from someone to you.

O Lord, may your word only be spoken, and your word only be heard. Amen.

Forgiveness is sometimes a very hard work. Sometimes an easy thing. Whether one or the other, there are some basics that God has given us.

I’ll say a couple of things about the love that God the Father has provided us in Jesus, right in our hearts and minds. That of course is the main ingredient.

But it is also extremely important that we see, as in the epistle to the Ephesians today, that by God’s design the work of forgiveness is meant to be a work most readily and easily carried out within this community of faith. This is one of the basics of forgiveness, that we need each other in order to stand strong to be forgiving people, and for that purpose, God has actually given to us each other.

How ironic, isn’t it. I mean, if it weren’t for people, I wouldn’t get hurt and have to forgive in the first place! You may have heard me say the corollary before: if it weren’t for people, the Church would be perfect. But WE are whom God has Given to US.

With that said, I’d like to point to the nitty gritty of forgiveness; and then point to our greatest enemy in forgiveness, and finish with one of the greatest gifts ever provided us as forgiving loving people.

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Beginning with the nitty gritty, it does not start with considering the “how CAN I” but rather the “SHOULD I” question. Here’s the question:

Should you forgive someone who hurt, abused or cheated you?

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The answer is an emphatic yes! And if that answer is not initially satisfactory, you will hear the qualifier question, "But how many times?" And the answer is still an emphatic, Yes.

One of the "essential elements of the world view" of our trinitarian God, revealed clearly in the holy scriptures, is that there is no question about it, and there is no exception about it: Yes, You ARE to forgive. The biblical imperative is, Do It. Did I say yet that there is no variance in Jesus' teaching? Now I did.

That takes care of Should I. That does however beg the HOW? question. Between the SHOULD and the HOW, there is an emotional resistance that could be called the Pain of Forgiving. Another way to say it is, The Personal Sacrifice of Forgiving. That being a reality, there must be something about the imperative of forgiving that goes beyond how I feel. Because often I sure don't FEEL like forgiving.

It doesn't take long being around people before you get hurt personally, large offense, small offense, it doesn't matter. My experience in church life is that the Rummage Sale is a particularly useful laboratory of practicing forgiveness. Rummage Sales demand a couple of weeks of intense work with each other – and, then, working with the public. And the public will come with a variety of philosophies on how to get along with people who are church people working at rummage sales. So, there will be plenty of opportunities to get your feelings hurt, and thus plenty of opportunities to practice the forgiveness of Christ.

I was thinking, would St. Paul have been offended if one of the tents he had made and given to someone who needed it was found by him back in the All Ephesus Rummage Sale!!.... but Paul didn't need a Rummage Sale to have the Holy Spirit prompt him on several occasions to talk about the fellowship of all the saints, or life in the community with each other in the Spirit. People being people, even baptized in water, washed in the blood of the lamb, confirmed, spirit filled, Jesus believing mature Christian church people, could fall out with each other.

The epistle is like a check list of how to live with each other, and especially what to do and what not to do so forgiveness wouldn't even be necessary. And I might add, Paul is talking within the Body of Christ. Ouch.

So, then:

- ✓ tell the truth to each other, because we belong to each other.
- ✓ If you let the day end with any anger, you will give opportunity to the devil to make it fester.
- ✓ Give the thief amongst you work, to make money, and so learn to give to others in need.
- ✓ No Evil, coarse Talk crosses your lips. Be speakers of encouragement and grace.
- ✓ If you don't do these things right you will be grieving the Holy Spirit of God, so don't do it, or else your redemption will be in jeopardy!

And yet, even with the Apostle Paul providing this checklist for avoiding the need to forgive, he can't just leave it there because he already knows that we often fail anyway.

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Then and now. It should not be a surprise to anyone to find out that there are people here today who have at one time or another been hurt by the words or actions of another person from All Saints'!

So Paul says, with this in mind, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children."

Here then we find the How, and one of the reasons why Paul wants us to consider forgiveness from within the fellowship. Be imitators of God. Not relying upon our hurts, but upon mercy, we thus create the space of love and safety that speaks of the promise of God to each one and to the entire Body gathered. In other words, If our Church is created in the image of God, and it is, then like the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, The Church is intended to also be a Community of Love.

Now, there is something that is missing in the imperative of both Paul and Jesus regarding forgiveness. What is missing is hearing them say, "As soon as you feel good about the other person....." And so the How? question is a question of the practice and discipline of the Will. How else can you get to forgiving one person 70 times or 7000 times for the same sin, or just once for something quite egregious. Can you imagine Jesus from the Cross saying, "As soon as I feel a little better about you all and what you've done to me, then I will consider saying, "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

We can take a cross cue here. Jesus knew BEFORE the cross that he would be forgiving. That was his job on the cross to take on our offenses, and then die with them. But, I'm not Jesus, I have heard. My usual sarcastic reply, said with love of course, is "No. You are not Jesus, thank God.":

We don't have to be Jesus to understand the imperative, though. Paul shares with us that the corrective to living together and working and praying together as humans is forgiveness. Up front. He said, "forgiving one another" which implies doing the work of forgiveness EVEN BEFORE THAT hurtful SOMEONE comes to YOU and says PLEASE FORGIVE ME. And, IF and WHEN that hurtful SOMEONE has come to the knowledge of their offense, and comes to YOU and says, PLEASE FORGIVE Me, your response will be..? Yes, I Forgive You.

You may remember back 10 years ago or so, when this kind of true forgiveness took on high public visibility, after Five Amish schoolgirls were killed, and 11 wounded, by a shooter in Pennsylvania. The Amish community not only comforted the shooter's wife and children, they forgave HIM, too. The Amish were then reviled by many in the press because they forgave, even as the Amish community mourned the death of their own innocent children. Did this seemingly too quick forgiveness take away or stuff or deny their grief and pain and loss? No. They all knew judgment was coming. But their grief was not the first aspect of forgiveness. And as they all testified, forgiving first allowed

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them to be set free. The Lord Jesus came to set the captive free, and in my UN forgiveness, it looks like I am the captive.

St. Paul said, forgive others, as Christ has forgiven you.
And Jesus said it this way, you will be forgiven, as we forgive others.
Powerful. Both motivation and gratitude.

I want to ask now that last question, but in the positive, How many of you who have been hurt by another All Saints' parishioner or clergyman have forgiven that person and hopefully found some restoration or reconciliation?

And God bless you all. And for this reason:

By forgiving, just as Jesus and Paul said to do, and those Amish parents and their community of faith did in support, you made forgiveness not a matter of delayed emotional peace, but a matter of obedience and the will, thus a matter of faith. Forgiveness not disconnected from our emotions but operating in tandem. Why? Because we are the people who display God's love. And you just witnessed to that community of God's kingdom and built it up.

If we don't, the very community, even the Kingdom of God here on earth, will shrivel up and become a shadow of what it is supposed to be.

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Now something about our greatest enemy and some tactics working against the virtue of forgiving.

"And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

And there you hear it again.... That this love and care and concern for each other, especially expressed by our willingness to forgive others, just as Jesus Christ forgave us, is so vitally important to the way we love each other. And it is SO DANG IMPORTANT to our effectiveness as Christians that it is a favorite place for the Enemy, the devil, to interrupt, deceive, lie, instigate, and darken our hopes for that love.

Here's how it happens: You have been offended. You go to Jesus. He puts his comforting arm around you, and says, "Forgive them. I'll heal you."

That's not what Satan wants. Satan is out to undermine the whole mission of Jesus, and your part in it. So you will hear the voice then of twisted wisdom and twisted personal protection. All WITHOUT God in the center. You will hear,

"Hold onto this hurt until you feel good about that person. And then you'll be ready to forgive them."

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No. That only delays and thus KEEPS you from forgiving. But the action of love gets us out there first, and this is key, by being obedient to what we know GOD wants us to do. He'll cover us from there.

Another twisted voice you will hear is some variation of keep it to yourself. Like, "I probably shouldn't be offended" or "I can deal with this on my own, I don't need any help", or "I'm just bothering people by asking for assistance from others."

No. That only buries the offense to the result of creating deeper wounds of bitterness, and it looks a lot like PRIDE. Even worse, the people in the community of saints do not have the opportunity to share with you the ways that God has gifted them for ministry, and thus you have side-stepped strengthening and edifying the community itself. Do not be afraid to share. Do it confidentially, that is, "relational trust" will always come into play. And Satan's attempts are busted.

I do like the advice of an old Joyce Myer 4 pointer on forgiveness, when she said, "Pay attention to your emotions while they are catching up to your decision to forgive." That will keep you alert to the enemy. And even better, "Pray for and love on your enemies; it will put flesh on your forgiveness."

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Now the last part.

In the last part of today's gospel, according to John, Jesus said, *"I am the bread of life. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die....and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

And as part of this same teaching, in all three of the other gospels Jesus says, as in Matthew 26:28, *"This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."*

I believe not only do we ourselves receive forgiveness as a benefit of this Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, but also that we will find the strength to forgive others, both in will and emotion, as we are in Communion with the one who has forgiven us. It is our Mission as Christians who have received, though Holy Baptism and the Eucharist, the divine nature of reconciliation, to go, and offer forgiveness. We are thus assured of God's favor and goodness toward us.

Let us pray for God's help.

Heavenly Father, lover of our souls, you have sent your Son Jesus to set us free from ourselves, and from the sins and offenses that burden us, by the pouring out of his Blood in mercy. Send your Holy Spirit now that by your grace and mercy we are indeed able to see your pathway to forgiveness, and be your loving people to each other. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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