

## THE FORGIVENESS BUSINESS

Romans 5:6-11; Matthew 9:1-13

In Jesus' name. Amen

Years ago it was common for teachers to make examples of students who misbehaved in class. This was done, usually, by making the student go to a chalkboard and write down, repeatedly, the offense committed in class; something like, "I will not pass notes to my friends," or, "I will not shoot rubber bands in class." Sometimes students would remain after school to clean the chalk erasers and wipe down the boards. What always fascinated me was walking into the classroom the next morning, only to see the chalkboard totally clean of the student's writing – as if the offense had been completely erased away. Years later in seminary I learned that this was what the word, forgiveness, is all about: wiping the slate clean and making a new start.

"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." This petition in the Lord's Prayer may be the one we struggle with the most. That God would forgive us is something we pray for and receive. We know this and we trust in this. In our Sunday (and Thursday night) gatherings for Holy Communion, it is our usual practice to begin the Service with a brief order for confession and forgiveness, or another form of a penitential rite. There are times when we have placed this rite in the middle of the Service as well.

But no matter where it is, we always hear words of love and grace. It is also our practice here to honor times for private confession as well, where the things that bother us most can be confessed individually and we hear words of pardon, forgiveness, and peace. We know that this gift from God comes at a high price in the suffering and death of his Son. Even so, the slate is wiped clean – and new starts are always our daily portion.

“At the right time,” St. Paul reminds us, “Christ died for the ungodly ... [for] while we were still sinners Christ died for us [Romans 5:6, 8b].” The church is in the “forgiveness business.” We give sacramental status to holy Absolution, to the hearing of those words, “In obedience to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins.” Through the Holy Office of Word and Sacrament pastors in the church are given this incredible word to speak. And all of us – gazing at the cross of Jesus – see there the heart of God the Father, whose will it is to bring us his forgiving love; a love which shall, at the end, be his final Word to us as we are raised up to begin our forever life, sharing in the kingdom of Jesus.

This “forgiveness business” is a shared business. Jesus teaches us that we are in it as his partners. Some of us here have visited the Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel in Coventry, England - where one can see one of the most dramatic symbols of forgiveness on display. The old cathedral was destroyed in the blitzkrieg of WW II,

in the constant bombings in England. Only a shell of the old cathedral was left. At war's end the Bishop of Coventry, along with the citizens of that city, decided to leave the ruins standing, and built a stunning new cathedral right next to it. The entrance into the new church is through the ruins of the old. This was done to remind the people of the church that one enters a new way of life through forgiving the past. So in the courtyard of Coventry Cathedral, where the altar was in the old church, there is a cross made out of the charred timbers of the roof of the old cathedral. It says these words, "Father, forgive." A number of Christians, including some Lutherans from Germany as well as some faculty members of Valparaiso University in Indiana – established at St. Michael's Cathedral the International Center for Christian Reconciliation. That center sponsored a team of Germans who went to Israel to work in a kibbutz. They lived with Jews in the kibbutz for six months, working side by side. When the time came to leave, an Orthodox Jew said with tears in his eyes, "When one person says to another, 'I want to love you,' one is glad. But when this is said by a person at whose hands one has suffered, there is no greater joy in this world." This was a lesson in forgiveness that made a powerful impact on those German Christians. The discovery of costly forgiveness reinforced for them the high cost of the forgiveness they received from God.

Forgiving, though, is always costly. Think, for a moment, of someone who has wronged you. In addition to the pain – anger, separation, haunting thoughts and grudges often follow. How can

one forget what another has done? Forgiveness is not a natural response for us. Rather our raw emotions – like vengeance, retribution, and - in some cases - violence, are more natural to us. It is also all too easy for us to be defensive, to speak harsh words to our offenders, or to bite back when bitten. But what if the person who did any of us such great harm ratcheted up the strength to come to any of us, asking for forgiveness? How would we respond? Would this “forgiveness business” that embraces us as Christians come forth? And would it flow forth from us freely – just as God’s forgiveness in Christ flows unconditionally to us?

That’s the rub, isn’t it? Forgiveness too often is tied to our own personal price tags. Forgiveness means I must let loose of myself – turning over my hurt, my fury, my disgust, my broken heart, my pride, my own hatreds and bitter words, my tears and my emptiness – allowing God to take these from me so that I can forgive. It calls me to begin things anew. But this isn’t easy. Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to forgive as our Father forgives us. This can be harder than facing any illness, any bad news, any of life’s crises – because, in order to do it, I have to let go. Otherwise these things will eat me alive.

When former President Bill Clinton met Nelson Mandela for the first time, he had a question on his mind: "When you were released from prison, Mr. Mandela," the former President said, "I woke my daughter at three o'clock in the morning. I wanted her to see this historic

event." Then President Clinton zeroed in on his question: "As you marched from the cellblock across the yard to the gate of the prison, the camera focused in on your face. I have never seen such anger, and even hatred, in any man as was expressed on your face at that time. That's not the Nelson Mandela I know today," said Clinton. "What was that about?" Mandela answered, "I'm surprised that you saw that, and I regret that the cameras caught my anger. As I walked across the courtyard that day I thought to myself, 'They've taken everything from you that matters. Your cause is dead. Your family is gone. Your friends have been killed. Now they're releasing you, but there's nothing left for you out there.' And I hated them for what they had taken from me. Then, I sensed an inner voice saying to me, 'Nelson! For twenty-seven years you were their prisoner, but you were always a free man! Don't allow them to make you into a free man, only to turn you into their prisoner!'" Then Mandela said, "You can never be free to be a whole person if you are unable to forgive."

In our Gospel for tonight Jesus declared a paralytic a forgiven man, and immediately healed him of his paralysis. This paralytic – in the church's Great Tradition – has come to symbolize humanity. We are paralyzed without the forgiveness Jesus brings. In the calling of Matthew, Jesus took a despised, traitorous tax collector, and chose him to be a disciple. And then, in perhaps one of Jesus' more bold and scandalous moments, he dined with tax collectors and other known sinners. "For I have come to call not the righteous but

sinner [Matthew 9:13b],” he said to his critics. The kingdom is all about forgiveness, healing and wholeness. It is from forgiveness that all other things flow. In another passage Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, if a member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but seventy times seven [Matthew 18:21-22].” To declare to someone that we are wiping the slate as clean as God wipes it for us in Christ is hard indeed! But it is a task we are not to shirk from.

Because the church – and all people for whom our Lord died – is all about the “forgiveness business.” We would be lost without the recognition that we are a forgiven people. The guiding principle of the Lutheran reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was found in the “solus,” the “alones”, if you will: grace alone, faith alone, scripture alone, Christ alone. Forgiveness of sins stands at the center of what we proclaim when we speak of Christ and him crucified. This forgiveness comes to us with a high price: the innocent suffering and the cruel death Jesus endured. God gave up that which was most precious to him as his Son hung in his agony. Even so, it is God himself, wiping our slates clean. It is Christ himself, standing in our stead before the judgment throne, pleading to his Father for our forgiveness. It is in the forgiving word, begun in Holy Baptism, where we are brought into the sovereign realm of the forgiveness of sins – reconciled, as St. Paul reminds us tonight, to God through our Lord Jesus Christ. What beauty there is in knowing – and trusting – in a God whose love for us is so great that with a word we are made holy and righteous in his

sight. And what wonder there is in hearing that we shall be greeted, at heaven's gate, with the final, absolving word, hearing that voice say, "Come, O blessed of my Father ..."

Tonight we come again, acknowledging that we are sinners, always in need of a forgiving word. Some of us will come forward as well, to be anointed with the oil of healing and wholeness – all of which has its beginnings in the forgiveness of sins. This forgiveness we can trust, costly to the one we call, "Father" – yet given to us through the merits of the very Son of God.

This forgiveness is what we are called upon to share as well – in a world where humanity is too often torn apart by recklessness, carelessness, and fear. It is not an easy task for us to declare those who sin against us forgiven. In fact it may well be the hardest thing some of us will ever have to do. But it is ours **to do**. How will others know of God's forgiveness if we give it only lip service? Instead, take this costly gift – it's ours to share. We may take it to those who have wronged us – speak it to those who suffer anguish and pain – speak "grace" to one another. We may forgive abundantly, knowing that this is the will of our Father and of his Son, Jesus Christ – and that this is truly our "business," especially when we pray, "... as we forgive those who trespass against us."