

“How Do We Forgive?”

Proper 19-A, Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 17, 2017

The French author Victor Hugo wrote a short story about a ship that was caught in a terrible storm at sea. Buffeted by the waves, the boat is rocking back and forth when suddenly the crew on deck hears a terrible crashing-sound, coming from below the deck. Immediately they know what is causing that sound! A cannon, they were hauling as cargo beneath the deck, had obviously broken loose from the ropes that were constraining it—**TO KEEP IT FIRMLY FIXED IN ONE PLACE**. And now that cannon was smashing back and forth into the sides of the ship with every movement of the boat. Suddenly it dawned on every crewman that the danger they were now experiencing from within their ship was greater than the danger they were embattling outside of their ship! --- Fortunately, however, two brave sailors were willing to risk of their own lives, by going below the deck and to fasten the cannon securely in its rightful place one again!

But isn't this a great truth, my brothers and sisters, that we are all forced to reckon with at times in our own lives as well? Sometimes, what is going on inside, with respect to our physical health and wellbeing may pose a greater threat to us than what is going on outside of us. This is especially true with respect to the **APPENDIX** that is about to burst inside of us, or **main ARTERIES THAT ARE BLOCKED** with plague, preventing a proper blood-distribution through our hearts. Or maybe it is that **LITTLE TUMOR** that is firmly fixed to one of our internal organs—like to one of our kidneys or to one of our lungs!

Friends, if this is true—with respect to the outside world—that internal threats may poses a greater **DANGER** to us than external threats; and with respect to our physical bodies and our physical health, **JESUS IS REMINDING US IN OUR GOSPEL LESSON TODAY THAT THIS IS EQUALLY TRUE WITH RESPECT TO OUR SOULS—AND OUR SPIRITUAL HEALTH. ESPECIALLY WHEN WHAT WE ARE CARRYING AROUND WITHIN US IS AN UNFORGIVING SPIRIT.**

Brothers and sisters Jesus has just reminded us in the passage before our Gospel lesson today, that served as our Gospel lesson last Sunday (Matthew 18:15-20) that the dangers that present themselves from with inside of a church—may pose a greater threat to that church's wellbeing, with respects to the ranks of its own membership—than those threats posed externally to a church from the outside world.

Because of the reality of human sin—people may find it major difficult—at times—getting along with one another. We forget what Paul tells us in I Corinthians 13, *“True love does not insist on its own way! True love hardly even notices when others do it wrong!”*

You heard Jesus last Sunday — *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you have gained your brother! If not take a witness with you—not so you can be declared the winner or more righteous than your brother or sister—and if that doesn't work—take it to the church!”* The whole goal is **RECONCILIATION, THOUGH SOMETIMES, UNFORTUNATELY, JESUS HIMSELF ADMITS, YOUR EFFORTS MAY BECOME A LOST CAUSE. JESUS SAYS, “Then let that person become to you as a Gentile or tax collector!**

Who is there, who has really been a member of the Church, in any place or time, who has not occasionally had their feelings hurt or maybe even their hearts broken by someone else in the Church? If that has never happened to you—then one of two things must be true about you: (1)

You are either VERY SAINTLY; or (2) You must have only been minimally involved with the internal working of a church.

SOMETIMES WE ALL ARE GUILTY, I BELIEVE, OF SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME TALKING ABOUT EACH OTHER WHEN WE SHOULD BE TALKING TO EACH OTHER.

Peter heard these words from Jesus' own mouth, that prompted Peter's question: "*Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? At least seven times*" (Matthew 18:21)?

Peter thought he was being very generous—because even the most prominent rabbis in that day—taught in the local synagogues—that God's people should be willing to forgive others at least three times!

Jesus shocking answer: "Not seven times Peter, but seventy times seven, meaning 490 times, though I believe that what Jesus is saying to us here—is that just as God's own grace and mercy are limitless—that flow to us through the news of our Savior's sacrificial death upon the cross and from the even greater news of his glorious resurrection from the dead—three days later—we too need to become, like King David in the Old Testament; "people after God's own heart!"

Wondering—has that other person truly forgiven me—can do strange things to us—just as that unanswered questions by Joseph's brothers, once their father Jacob had died, was really leaving them in quite a quandary. I am not sure who said it—and no—it is not a verse that is found anywhere in the Bible, but it does summarize for us a powerful spiritual truth that the Bible teaches us: "To err is human and to forgive is divine!"

SO WHY DON'T PEOPLE FORGIVE? Perhaps you remember Herman Melville's GREAT classic novel he wrote with the title: MOBY DICK. The most prominent character in the novel is the cruel, obsessive, vengeful Captain Ahab; the skipper of the ship. He hates Moby Dick, the great whale, with a terrible passion. Every waking hour for Captain Ahab is consumed with his deep personal quest to destroy this leviathan that has crippled him. Soon, we see, however that it is not Moby Dick that is the victim of Captain Ahab's hatred—but Ahab himself. In his obsession—he eventually ends up killing everything and everyone around him: the whale, the crew and finally himself!

OF COURSE, OUR PRIDE ALWAYS STANDS IN THE WAY OF ANY FORGIVENESS WE MIGHT BE WILLING TO EXTEND TOWARDS OTHERS, OR OTHERS' PRIDE TOWARDS US! In our refusal to forgive others, we may be vexed with the obsessive thought—that we are—somehow—by maintaining a hard-hearted attitude towards another person—doing something that will "really teach them a lesson!"

HOW DO WE FORGIVE? FIRST, WE MUST REALIZE THAT FORGIVENESS MUST ALWAYS COME TO US INITIALLY AS GIFT OF GOD'S GRACE THAT COMES TO US EXTERNALLY—FROM OUTSIDE OF US—THROUGH THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST—AND BE IMPORTED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT TO THE INSIDE OF US!

This is why Jesus shared that marvelous little parable with us about the: "Unforgiving Servant;" a story about a man who owed his king ten thousand talents. Though it is difficult to calculate; one commentator I read says that we could consider the enormous sum of money the king had forgiven this servant who was begging for the king's mercy to be somewhere around \$10,000,000; in other words—in the minds of most of us, an inconceivable amount of money—since according to the Roman tax records at that time, all Israel's taxes towards the Roman

government in those days were estimated to be somewhere around \$800,000.

SO, CHRIST WAS SAYING THAT THIS FIRST SERVANT WHO BEGS THE KING TO BE MERCIFUL TOWARDS HIM WAS HOPELESSLY INDEBTED TOWARDS THE KING. His IOU would have been totally impossible for him to have ever paid! Even though this man must know in his mind and in his heart of hearts that he could never repay such an enormous debt, he still says to the king: "Have mercy upon me and I will repay you in full!"

It was not because of what was in the servant's heart or mind, or because that servant had such a stellar reputation in the world of finance and trade or because that servant received an outstanding score on his EQUIFAX CREDIT REPORT, THOUGH EQUIFAX WE WERE TOLD THIS PAST WEEK MAY HAVE A LOT OF QUESTIONS TO ANSWER WITH RESPECT TO THEIR OWN FINANCIAL HEALTH OR LACK OF IT!

The king forgave that servant his debt only because the king had pity on this servant, and the dire straits that this man found himself in, that he decided—that instead of throwing this man in jail, he simply forgave him that debt and "freed him up," loosening him from his great personal obligation, that he simply forgave that servant all of his debts in full, so that he might undeservingly resume his prior station in life—as a husband to his wife and as a father to their children! This same servant—however—very shortly after the fact—discovers that he has a fellow servant who only owed him 100 denari, with a "denari" being the average man's daily, working wage. It was as if his fellow servant only owed him \$20—a meager, minuscule sum of money indeed—when compared to the \$10,000,000 debt he had just been forgiven by the king! But—can you believe it?

THIS VERY MAN WHO HAD HIS ENORMOUS DEBT DISCHARGED BY THE KING COULD NOT FORGIVE THE TINY DEBT OWNED TO HIM BY A NEIGHBOR. HE HAD THE MAN THROWN MERCILESSLY INTO JAIL.

THE CONTRAST IS STRIKING! OF COURSE, JESUS WAS NOT SIMPLY TALKING ABOUT ONE MAN WHO LIVED AT THIS ONE UNIQUE TIME IN HISTORY AND IN THIS ONE PLACE! Here Jesus is talking about you and me. We have been forgiven by God. We are sinners saved by grace. This what the cross of Calvary is all about! It is about the cancellation of an enormous debt that each of us has had previously forgiven us by the Heavenly Father who created heaven and earth!

Dwight L. Moody once put added some light to our understanding of this great Parable of the Unforgiving Servant—in a beautiful way! Dwight Moody said, "I can imagine Jesus saying, 'Go search out the man who put the crown of thorns on my head; tell him I have a crown of life waiting for him in heaven, if he will but confess his sins to me and receive the free gift of my eternal salvation; and there shall not even be one, single, solitary thorn in it! Secondly, Moody added, "I can imagine Jesus finding that man with that reed that man used to smote me with upon my head—only driving the thorns of that bloody crown more deeply into my brow. Tell him, I want to give him a scepter—that he might reign with me one day in heaven!" Finally, Moody said, "Go seek out that poor soldier who drove the spear into my side and tell them there is a much nearer way to my heart than that! This is by that soldier's receiving the forgiveness of sins that I have come into this world to bring to him and to all people!"

SECONDLY, WE NEED TO RECOGNIZE THAT FORGIVENESS IS THE MOST POWERFUL WITNESS WE CAN EXERCISE GOING FOR US TO DEMONSTRATED THE REALITY OF GOD'S GRACE BEING ACTIVE IN OUR LIVES.

THIRDLY, WE NEED TO RECOGNIZE THAT FORGIVENESS IS A POSITIVE ACTIVITY THAT ALWAYS CONTRIBUTES HEAVILY TO THE HEALING AND WHOLENESS OF OUR OWN HEARTS! Who could have ever imagined 2000 years ago that the primary symbol of the Christian faith—would have become THE EQUIVALENT OF WHAT PEOPLE IN LATER GENERATIONS AS A GUILLOTINE, OR HANGMAN'S NOOSE, OR AN ELECTRIC CHAIR, OR A LETHAL INJECTION? These kinds of analogies are sometimes helpful in preventing us from becoming so ABSOLUTELY SENTIMENTAL ABOUT THE OLD RUGGED CROSS—THAT WE FORGET THAT IT WAS ALSO, FIRST AND FOREMOST—AN EMBLEM OF SUFFERING AND SHAME. HUMANITY NAILED GOD'S OWN SON ONTO A CROSS! What barbarity! What an unspeakable evil! Yet God turned that cross into the means, by which you and I, may find our salvation. This is what God can do with forgiveness.

Maybe you and I should try to carry out a little experiment someone proposed some time ago to help us truly perceive and understand the power of the cross. The author of that experiment first says to you and me: Take one of those 50-gallon, heavy, aluminum, garbage can lids—and lay it flat on a healthy portion of your very green and luscious lawn. Leave it there for ten days. After ten days, lift that lid and look underneath that lid! What you will probably see then is some very pale-looking, sickly grass! Then you may even see some roaches and worms nesting in the dark decay of that patch of withered grass! This is what sin does to every one of us!

If you put that lid back down upon that same spot of grass, would the grass have the power to remove that lid all by itself? No—that would be impossible! And again, we are like that helpless grass or like man in our text with an impossible debt that we owe to King. Once again, we are totally helpless to free ourselves from the debt we owe our King.

But finish the experiment! Take the lid away—once again! Let the bugs flee and scamper away! Overtime, as the grass receives more and more sunshine and the necessary moisture—its health will again be restored! In other words, it is literally forgiven and let loose from bondage and decay!

Forgiveness is just like this! What we can't pay, God pays—and not with perishable things such as silver and gold; but with the holy, precious blood and with the innocent sufferings and death of God's beloved Son Jesus Christ, so that he might ransom us as a people unto God! God alone lets us loose from the debt of our sins and frees us always to live a new life—and to begin life anew, once again!

Just like the unleashed cannon in Victor Hugo's story, are there perhaps any unforgiving spirits that could quite possibly be crashing around, back and forth, inside of you and me, tearing our guts out, rending our minds and tormenting us with the constant movement of guilt and shame in our lives every day? Right now, ask Jesus to take your hand and to go beneath the deck of the ship of your life with you! Tell him you are weak! Tell him that without his companionship, you believe you will fail? But tell him also you are willing to forgive, willing to go with him and take care of all the troubling things within! Yes, tell Jesus you're willing even as you ask him to supply you with the power, his power to forgive others through you, and the healing—let the healing begin! Amen