

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹

The Twenty Second Sunday after Trinity²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighth Verse of the seventh Chapter of Zechariah.⁴

“And the word of the Lord came unto Zechariah, saying, Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew [SHOW] mercy and compassions every man to his brother: And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart. But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear. Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the Lord of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets: therefore came a great wrath from the Lord of hosts. Therefore it is come to pass, that as he cried, and they would not hear; so they cried, and I would not hear, saith [SETH] the Lord of hosts: But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them, that no man passed through nor returned: for they laid the pleasant land desolate.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-first Verse of the eighteenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.⁵

“Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith [SETH] unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying,

Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. So when his fellowservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: *“Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.’”*⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

How, then, do we learn to forgive? We know that we are commanded to forgive *“seventy times seven”* times, but how do we do this when forgiving is so contrary to our nature? This was the quandary Peter expressed: *“‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’”*

You can almost hear the frustration, the anger, the hurt, in Peter's plaintive question. For Peter, as so often for us, this was not just a philosophical point of inquiry, but a real, personal and painful question. From Peter's tone we can imagine that he was troubled by some offense he held onto, and now realized he must forgive. Peter, like us, must have been troubled by what sometimes seems the unfairness of forgiving others for what we perceive as the wrongs they do to us.

Why is it so hard for us to forgive others? Part of the answer is that when we have been hurt, it is part of our fallen human nature to want to lash out and hurt the one who caused us pain in return. We want to make the one who hurt us pay for what he did to us. Sometimes we are angry because we have been rejected by others. We naturally seek the approval of others, and when we don't get that approval, we are hurt. We feel our worth is diminished, and we are ashamed.

But we must remember that vengeance is not ours to demand. In reality, those who attack us are usually acting out of their own pain and because they are weak. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to help to know that they are weak when we want revenge. We are blinded by our lust to achieve our perceived justice.

Vengeance, however, is God's alone to take. *"Beloved, never avenge ourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord,'"* says St. Paul.⁷

Instead, he offers, *"if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*⁸

Our Lord tells us to forgive without reservation or limit. *"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."*⁹ Forgive, in other words, as much as there is to be forgiven. This is in accordance with what we pray in the Lord's Prayer, in which we ask, *"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."* As long as we reflect this way of God, we too can be forgiven. We know that our

Lord's forgiveness knows no bounds, therefore, neither should our forgiveness know limits.

Nor should we ever try to keep count of the offenses against us. Doing so would imply that we are only waiting for some arbitrary limit to be reached before we will finally have had enough, and can finally strike out at our tormenters.

We can imagine the one doing this, double-checking his list; "Two more times ... just two more times and I'm gonna really fix that guy."

No, our forgiveness must be from the heart, not given grudgingly and with reservations, but offered freely and without measure, just as God offers his forgiveness freely and without limit to us. We cannot hold back some secret desire for eventual revenge. Instead, we must honestly seek the welfare of those who have injured us.

If we do not offer forgiveness freely and without reservation, then we place ourselves in the position of the debtor in Jesus' parable. The debtor asked forgiveness from his master, which was granted, but then he who had been forgiven a huge debt refused to forgive the man who owed him, even though the debt he himself owed far exceeded what the other man owed him.

Just as the debtor could not pay his debts, neither can we pay our debt of sin to God. We are, as it were, bankrupt in sin. Except for the merciful forgiveness of God, we would face justice. As we are cautioned, if we fail to forgive others, then our own debt of sin will be held against us.

In the same way that the master, on hearing that the man for whom he had forgiven much has refused to forgive others, returned and punished that man, so will God hold us accountable for our debts if we refuse to forgive the debts of others.

All of which finally returns us to the original question: How do we learn to forgive?

First, we need to realize that we are forgiven children of God. We have been forgiven. God has told us that we are His eternally. Nothing that anyone can say or do can change that. When we remember whose we are, then the attacks of others against us pale to insignificance in comparison. Suddenly, the words and actions of others, which seemed so troubling before, shrink to nothingness.

Second, we must understand that those who attack us are themselves weak. Remember that Jesus forgave all, even those who were crucifying Him as He hung there on the Cross. We have the greatest teacher and example there ever could be.

Third, we must remember that as we forgive others, we open the door to our own healing. When we hold grudges, anger and bitterness against others within us, those feelings become a cancer on our very soul.

When we forgive, the anger, the bitterness, the resentment we hold towards the ones who hurt us lance the festering wound and permit the healing grace of God to enter in, to purify and to heal us. When we forgive, it is as if we have allowed God to apply the healing salve to our wound and we can ourselves then begin to heal.

So, once again, how do we learn to forgive? We learn to forgive by realizing that in forgiving others, we not only make it possible for us to be forgiven ourselves, but we also permit ourselves to be healed. For our own good, then, as well as the good of those who we forgive for having harmed us, as must forgive. We forgive because that is the pathway to God.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, upon whose forgiveness we depend for our life and our salvation, teach us to forgive others, as we ourselves have been forgiven by You. Let us be guided always by Your loving example of forgiving even those who crucified You. Help us to let go of pride, anger and re-

sentment, and hold fast instead to humility, love and grace in trying always to follow You. This we ask through our only Mediator and Advocate, Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

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The Rev. Mr. Larry Wagoner, MSW¹⁰
November 4, 2012

¹ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² *This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Twenty-Second Sunday after Trinity, 2012.*

³ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* xxxix (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1928).

⁴ *Zechariah 7:8-end (KJV).*

⁵ *St. Matthew 18:21-end (KJV).*

⁶ *St. Matthew 18:21 (RSV).*

⁷ *Romans 12:19 (RSV).*

⁸ *Romans 12:20-21 (RSV).*

⁹ *St. Matthew 18:22 (RSV).*

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