

Sermon for the Twenty Second Sunday After Trinity
October 23rd, 2016
The Cathedral Church of the Epiphany, Columbia, SC
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There is a line in the Lord's Prayer that I am afraid we don't often take to heart. "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

When we pray this part of the Lord's prayer, we are asking God to forgive us, *as* we forgive others. Now, when I say this, I say to God, "God, I have sinned against you; Forgive me like I forgive those who sin against me." What does that look like? Well, this could be a good thing. If I forgive others, then what I have asked is good for me. But if I refuse to forgive another, then I am inviting a very bad time for myself. If we do take our prayers seriously, and I very much hope that we all do, then we have to acknowledge the seriousness of this petition, "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

However, lest you think I am merely describing a quid pro quo deal, let's take a deeper look at the idea of forgiveness. Consider this:

It can feel good to be mad at someone. It can feel good hold on to your anger and to refuse to forgive them. You take that anger, and the rage, and you bottle it up inside you. But reaching that point where we can and actually do forgive the other person is absolutely critical.

Anger and resentment and rage can eat you up on the inside. It will get in the way of your relationships, both with God and with each other. It's like dirt on a glasses lens, making it harder and harder to see as more of it piles up.

But how often then, should you forgive? If you take the literal meaning of the gospel text this morning, how many times should you forgive someone? Seventy times seven times. That's a large number. But numbers don't have the same spiritual and mystical significance for us that they had for Peter and the other first century Palestinian jews. What Jesus is telling him is that he must forgive over and over. For Peter, this is an infinite number of times.

But let's be clear: Jesus is not telling us that we are to be enablers or to forgive simply for the sake of reaching that high number. That would not truly be forgiveness. What Jesus is telling us that we are to forgive, because we have been forgiven. How many times have we offended God? How many times have we needed to be forgiven by God? I can't speak for you, but as for me, I've lost count.

God is Love. God is love itself, by which all love is known and measured. And so God is a deep, bottomless well of forgiveness, and who is, as the Prayer Book says, "wont to give more than either we desire or deserve." Our sins have earned us a sentence of death, but life comes through Jesus Christ, given to us through the Love of God.

We, who have been made in the image of God, out of love; who have been redeemed, again, out of love; who have been fed with the Sacrament of Love, the Eucharist; we must draw on God's

Love for our own. We are to be transformed into God's likeness. We are to decrease, so that Jesus may increase. When others look at us, they should see Jesus, in our actions, in our love. That requires a partaking of the infinite love of God. That requires forgiving others as God forgives us. The requires doing what Jesus did, when he hung on the cross, and said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

This is not to say that we simply turn on "Christian mode" and all is well, or that we can forgive at the push of a button. That is far too simplistic and understanding of God and grace and human nature. Forgiveness takes time, and prayer, and growth. It is rather like a garden, cultivated, and weeded, and watered over a period of time. But just like a patch of rough dirt can be turned into a bed of roses or lilies, so too can an injured soul be healed.

Remember that we have been given the Ministry of Reconciliation. Jesus Christ wishes to restore all things in Himself, and that includes you and me. We have to let go of resentment and anger and fear, because if we don't let go of it, it will not let go of us, and it will stay in our hearts like a spiritual poison. It must be drawn out of us, that we may work for the healing of God's people, to set our relationships with him and with our fellow man aright.