



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The 22nd Sunday after Trinity, November 16th, 2014

✠ **In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost** ✠

Historically the doctrine of “Original Sin” has never been especially popular. But never has it been less popular than it is today. How many times does one hear people protest: “But I’m a good person!” – and usually after committing an appalling betrayal or act of unkindness.

This sort of thinking is known as “Pelagianism” after the British theologian Pelagius who postulated the idea 1,600 years ago. Pelagius speculated that we, human beings, are not intrinsically flawed; that we are not congenitally inclined to be disobedient to God. Thus some of us, theoretically at least, are capable of achieving salvation quite independent of Jesus Christ.

This probably wouldn't sound particularly controversial to many of today's churchgoers. Indeed Pelagius' speculations are essentially reflected in the doctrines promulgated by most of our mainline churches. Their confessions of sin, for example, seem largely to consist of disingenuous finger-pointing at the politically incorrect attitudes and activities of people disapproved of by the folks doing the confessing.

It marches hand in hand, moreover, with an apparent assumption that God is becoming more enlightened, almost as enlightened as some of more advanced social theoreticians – so much so in fact he is revising the whole gamut of his commandments. The creed is no longer begins “I believe ...” but rather “It's all good.” And “thou shalt not” has become “just do it.”

But this isn't what poor old Pelagius envisioned when he started out on the theological speculations. He would be appalled by what is going on today. He was, in fact, a sincere and pious Christian who simply couldn't let go of a really stupid idea.

This is very sad because if he had paid closer attention to today's Gospel he might have realized how wrong he was before things got so far out of hand. That is because today's Gospel demonstrates just how intrinsically disobedient we are and, thus, just how desperately we need Jesus to do the job of saving us.

In this passage from St. Matthew's Gospel, St. Peter asks a \$64,000 question: How many times should we forgive people who sin against us? These days preachers tend to treat Peter as though he blurted out a stupid question. This is because in answering the question, Jesus administered a most monumental put down -- The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

But it's most unfair to treat Peter as if he is a dolt. Sure, he often says silly things, just like the rest of us. But on this occasion the question he is asking is quite sensible; a question to which he has clearly given much thought. Actually, the question might have been better phrased as “How often should I forgive somebody I loved and trusted and who has horribly betrayed me?”

Peter clearly understands God's standards are very much higher than ours when it comes to forgiveness. Few human beings forgive loved ones who betray them twice, let alone seven times. What's more, to the Jews of Peter's day the number seven was a “Perfect Number.” Thus in using the number seven, Peter implies we should forgive those who betray us an awful lot – many more times than seven.

Peter's use of the word “brother” is telling. Strangers rarely offend us so deeply that forgiving them is virtually impossible. The people who are really difficult to forgive are those who are close to us – family members, lovers, friends, fellow parishioners. They are the people we rely on for our everyday

sense of wellbeing. And these are the people whose betrayals really cut us to the quick.

The question is: "Are there limits to forgiveness or does God expect us continually to forgive friends and loved ones who continually let us down? Is forgiveness and entirely open-ended obligation?"

Jesus' answer is "Yes. God commands you to be equally forgiving." And the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant explains why.

It's difficult to understand this parable unless you have some idea about the value of money in the Roman Empire of the First Century AD. Ten thousand talents was an impossibly large sum – a sum greater than the gross national products of most countries. It was a sum so huge that even if the unforgiving servant and his wife and children were sold into slavery, the price they would fetch would not make so much as a dent in it.

For a king to forgive a servant a debt of 10 thousand Talents would be rather like the President finding out the Secretary of State or the Secretary of Defense had wangled an unsecured loan of 10 billion dollars from the Treasury and then telling them: "Don't worry about it. It's a gift." The whole thing is quite outlandish.

At the same time, the debt the other servant owed the unforgiving servant was no small potatoes. Back in those days, 100 Denarii ("pence" the King James Bible calls them) was a substantial sum of money – half of a senior bureaucrat's annual salary.

This means the debtor owed the unforgiving servant something between \$40,000 and \$60,000 in modern money – enough to get most folks attention. And, what's more, he had clearly owed it to him for quite some time. In other words, the fellow servant was no wide-eyed innocent, but an habitual offender.

The point Jesus is making is that all of us are so deeply in God's debt, there is no way we can adequately repay him. Even if we give him everything we possess – even if we dedicate our entire lives, and the lives of our loved ones, to him -- it will in no way redress the balance outstanding.

From the very outset of our lives, we fall so far short of God's standards, there is no way we can clean up our acts sufficiently to meet even a minimum standards of holiness.

Because of this – because God readily forgives each and everyone of us such a vast debt -- it is our obligation to forgive our fellow men the infinitely

smaller transgressions that they commit against us. He's not merely telling us that we have an obligation to forgive friends and loved ones who do things that hurt us. He is explaining that the vast debt we owe God outweighs all the wrongs that are done against us in this world. Like Jesus, we should even forgive our executioners. |

This is a very tall order even for the most saintly folks, committed to an unceasing pursuit of virtue. In fact, the only people who might be tempted to take comfort from it are habitual sinners, like the person who owed \$60,000 to the unforgiving servant. However, the fact of the matter is that, as far as the parable is concerned, all of us are habitual sinners.

But the fact that we are obliged to forgive those who sin against us does not mean they can avoid the consequences of their sins. Forgiveness is one thing, and consequences are another. The fact that we are obliged to forgive somebody a debt does not mean we are obliged to lend to them again. Someone who betrays a trust cannot expect to be unreservedly trusted in future.

It is, however, vital to remember we can only forgive people the transgressions they have committed against us, personally. We cannot forgive them for the evil that they have done to other people. More particularly, we are not in a position to forgive people for the sins they have committed against God. Only God can do that.

One of the lessons we should learn from this is that there are terrible consequence in store for folks who fail to forgive those who sin against them – and not merely the consequences to be faced on judgment day. There consequences here on earth as well. Nothing is more corrosive to the human soul than grudge-bearing. It destroys love and poisons all relationships.

The most important lesson of all is that while virtue is its own reward, none of us have the right to feel virtuous. All of us, even the most saintly, are in equal need of God's forgiveness -- the forgiveness Jesus purchased for us on the cross.' *AMEN*.