



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Sunday October 23rd, 2016 - Trinity 22

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

The passage selected for the sermon this morning is taken from the Gospel:

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 unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. Matthew 18:21-2

You have probably heard me preach about my Irish grandmother's passing. Her departed brother came to her just before she died to strengthen her. At the death, she was surrounded by angels. As she passed away, her last words to us were to comfort us, to remind us that she was going to a beautiful and joyful place and to encourage us to persevere until we would join her.

You have not heard me preach about my French grandmother's passing. I loved her dearly. Growing up I was with her nearly every day. She lived upstairs from us, and to encourage me to walk and climb, my parents allowed me to slip away from the cacophony of my brother and sisters, and climb upstairs to have a coke, play cards with my grandmother, and be spoiled rotten.

But she was an unhappy woman with anyone but me. She wearied my mother with complaints about her housekeeping and child rearing. My grandfather spent every evening in his workshop, where the grinding of the drills and saws was a quirt relief from grinding of her complaints and the sharpness of her tongue. Like me, she was the oldest of eight siblings, but I don't ever remember a time when four or five of them weren't shunning the others. The configuration of begrudged sisters might change, but there was never a time when the grudge wasn't exercised in full force.

I was with her the last 36 hours of her life, and as much as my Irish grandmother's death was gracefully easy, this grandmother's death was hard. She had emphysema, and fought for every breath the last day and a half. About half way through the vigil with her, she started to mutter under her breath. To my brother in law and sister who were with me, it sounded like unconscious

babbling, but to me, who had spent so much time with her, it was as recognizable and clear as anything had ever been. For 10 hours, she continued talking, and she was meeting every person she had ever crossed or had ever failed to forgive in her unconscious state, and making peace, either asking for or granting forgiveness. When she was done, her breathing smoothed, her coughing stopped, and she coasted gently through the last two hours until she quietly crossed to the other side.

We often hear the phrase, "You can't take it with you", and we most naturally apply it to our possessions or our money. The truth is that it is at least equally applicable to the anger, and hard heartedness and the grudges we bear through our lives. At the end, we can not be in the presence of our Lord and Savior, who answered our selfishness, pride and hurtfulness with his loving sacrifice for our sins on the Cross, and still bear those hardhearted feelings against those He had given us most closely in our lives. We will either have to take my grandmother's path and make peace before we go to His presence, or we will have to take our misery to the place Jesus is not and spend eternity wallowing in our hatred and self-pity.

It is also true that it is not only the quality of our death and our final disposition that is affected by our hardhearted unwillingness to forgive. It is the quality of every day, of every life, that is measured by the standard of compassion and forgiveness.

there is no more Christ-like quality, and no less human quality, than forgiveness. Humans are loathe to forgive. Our hearts are hardened by the world. The steely sword of heart felt sorrow is a two edged sword, one blade honed in our unwillingness to release our anger, often anger justly earned, and the other side sharpened by despair that the hurts we inflict are too grievous to ever be forgiven.

But the character of God, the fruit of Godliness, is forgiveness. Scripture is a continuous reaching out by God to the stiff necked and willful children who reject and disobey Him. He continually forgives them and restores them. From the promise in Genesis of a Redeemer to crush the head of the serpent, through the Covenants with

Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Moses, to the Baptism of John, and finally, by the Crucifixion and Resurrection, God proves and re-proves his grace to forgive.

Real forgiveness for humans is impossible without that grace. We suffer greatly as humans. The world is unfair. Those we love most are taken from us, or they fail our expectation, or they hurt us in some spasm of selfishness that grieves us in mind, heart and soul.

Our pride tells us we should be treated better, that we deserve respect and peace and good will. Our conscience tells us otherwise. In our hearts, we must admit that the greatest hurts we receive are merely reflections of the hurts we have inflicted. Only one man, perfect in obedience and love ever deserved to be free from suffering, and that man carried our sins willingly to the Cross, to honor His Father, and to redeem us, His ungrateful servants.

There is a popular saying. "You can't take it with you." We usually attribute the message to earthly goods or treasures. But this saying is just as true for unforgiveness. We can not go to heaven holding a grudge. We can't be in the presence of Jesus having failed to beg forgiveness for our sins. Imagine, facing the King who has forgiven us our unspeakable debts, and having to justify our devotion to hatred for the injustices we have suffered in this life.

It is a curiosity of these earthly vessels, our human bodies, that as we age, our skills diminish, our senses dull, and our minds weaken. But, two skills which improve with age, are the abilities to be offended, and to offend. Even as we approach death, when every other system in the body has shut down and failed, the heart, hardened and unforgiving, is the last vibrant organ that must be tamed before we can die. If you have had the blessing of being with a loved one as they passed, you know that peace comes only when peace is made with every one that we had offended or by whom we had been offended. Nothing is more sad or hard to watch than a loved one near death holding onto hate instead of hope.

So we are left now to struggle with the practical application of the lesson. How can we forgive? There are self help books, schools of psychology, pseudo-spiritual movements that tout the healing power of forgiveness. They tell us to just let go of our anger, or just confess our fault, and will be released from our pain to soar carefree on the wind, like pixies on a beam of light. That is nothing but hogwash. When you confront the hardness of your heart toward someone who has really hurt you, or you come to beg forgiveness of someone you have hurt, the decision to forgive does not relieve the pain. It still hurts, badly. It can hurt for years, and it can hurt even more once you have chosen forgiveness than it did when forgiveness was begrudged. The need to forgive has nothing to do with making us feel better.

In the Garden of Gethsamane, when Jesus considered the price He would pay to forgive those men who could not stay up with Him an hour, who would

desert Him in His need, He did not feel release. When He thought about each of us, who continually sin against him in our pride and selfishness, He didn't feel like a pixie floating on the wind. He fell on His knees in desperate prayer and sweat blood. Forgiveness didn't feel better the next day. He was scourged, spit upon, betrayed, and pierced with nails to hang upon the Cross. Forgiveness cost Him everything, so that when the Centurion pierced His side, all that was left was a drop of His Blood, mingled with a drop of water. He had suffered the ultimate pain and indignity for the forgiveness of our sins.

We certainly don't deserve to have less pain than Jesus, though in truth, we do. The worst of what we suffer can't compare to what He suffered because He was innocent. But it will likely still hurt even after we are committed forgive. It can hurt for years. It can hurt until the day we die. We are to take that pain, and we are to do with it what Our Lord Jesus Christ did with the pain He suffered in forgiving us. We are to offer that pain up as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to our heavenly Father. That is what it means to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Our Lord told us that the peacemakers, those who forgive and those who beg forgiveness, would see heaven. He proclaimed that those who suffered persecution and injustice for His Name's sake should rejoice, for their reward would be great in heaven. The wounds from which Jesus bled for our Redemption were transformed into the marks of glory on His Resurrected body. Those marks are the proof of His love for those who might doubt that He would suffer so much for us who can never earn His forgiveness, and can scarcely even appreciate it now that it has been granted. The marks on our hands, and in our hearts, the scars from wounds we bear because we suffer to forgive each other, and to ask forgiveness for ourselves, will become the marks of Glory in our Resurrected bodies.

The truth is that it is hard to sustain forgiveness when it the hurt from the offense persists, but we have been given grace to assist us in that effort. St. Paul told us in the Epistle, that we must be "confident of this very thing, that He which has begun a good work in us will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." The good work begun in us is the seed of forgiveness. It is the fruit that we must bear as Christians, the witness we are called to make to the world. We forgive each other, not to relieve the pain of our offenses, but despite the pain, and for glory and praise of the God who loved us enough to forgive us. By grace we forgive as we have been forgiven and we ask Our Father to forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen