



# ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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**Sunday July 23, 2017 – Trinity VI**

**✠ 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:

“Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there remember that thy brother has ought against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way, and be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.”

St. Matt. 5:23-4

For a Christian, there is nothing that represents the character of God more acutely than forgiveness. It is because God is love that He sent His only begotten Son to the end that we should not pay the deathly consequence of our sin, but rather live through His forgiveness. Of course, in commanding us to imitate his character of love by loving our neighbor, God is also commanding us to practice forgiveness amongst ourselves.

That is not an easy commandment for us, because as much as forgiveness epitomizes the character of God, it is also the antithesis of our human character. It is worth considering as we meditate on our capacity for forgiveness, that the challenge is not equally balanced.

It is certainly difficult to forgive the injuries that are inflicted upon us. We tend to nurture our grudges and relinquish them reluctantly. However, even pop culture and pseudoscience

witness the emotional and physical benefits of releasing the toxins that are the byproduct of an unwillingness to forgive. To be the one with the option to forgive is to be in a godly position, and we certainly love to give ourselves godly privilege. It's never easy to forgive, but granting forgiveness isn't as difficult as asking forgiveness.

If we read the verse from this Gospel carefully, that is the challenge that is being issued. “If your brother have aught against you, leave thy gift, go thy way, and be reconciled.” While granting forgiveness is a godly privilege, asking forgiveness, becoming the humble petitioner, puts us back in the proper relationship between the creature and the Creator. Since God has required we serve Him and prove our love for Him by the way we love our neighbor, it is an undeniable requirement of our obedience that we also make ourselves humble petitioners when we ask forgiveness from each other.

Granting forgiveness frees us from the toxic sludge of our grudges and heals our own bodies and souls. That is of crucial importance to our physical and spiritual health. Asking forgiveness is preaching the Gospel without words. It is by humbling ourselves, and courageously facing the chance that our request might not be granted, that we change the world. That unselfish act, whether witnessed only by

the person we have hurt, or by a wider community, is godliness. There is nothing in this world we gain for ourselves by making that act of humility. Taking that risk can only be justified if we have faith in our Christian destiny to live in the eternal world of God's love. Those locked in this world of selfish pointlessness cannot remain unmoved and unconverted in the face of that witness.

I often wonder what our life in this world would be if only Adam and Eve could have asked forgiveness instead of passing blame on down the line. Remember that they sinned by pride and disobedience, but that wasn't why they were expelled. It was only when being confronted by God to make account of their sin, and refusing to do so, that they were exiled to the sadness, sickness and death that rules the world we inherit.

The unwillingness to accept responsibility for our offenses isn't just a remnant of original sin. It is the character of man that is exhibited throughout the Bible. Cain denies the murder of his brother out of jealousy. Sara denies her scornful laughter when she overheard the promise she would bear a son in her old age. King David, who was willing to put a man to death for stealing his poor neighbor's sheep, was also willing to murder the husband and soldier he betrayed rather than asking forgiveness. Every denial, every rationalization for our sin, every assumption of privilege that excuses us from humbly petitioning forgiveness deepens our suffering in this kingdom of sin and death.

But the courage of asking forgiveness opens this world to the transcendent change that is the inevitable result of God's grace. Mary Magdalene washes the feet of Jesus with her

tears and becomes the first witness of the Resurrection. The Good Thief confesses his sins, and joins Jesus as He opens the gates of Heaven. St Peter weeps in shame as the cock crows over his denials, and is endowed with the strength and courage to lead the Apostles to into the Temple at Pentecost and through his life until his own crucifixion. St. Thomas repented his unbelief and established the Church in India that has persisted from the first century. St. Paul lamented his complicity in the murder of St Stephen, and extended the witness of Peter and the Apostles to the rest of the World.

Many of the merciful and charitable works that characterize the Christian character are copied in the world because there is reward for doing so in this world. People feed the poor and clothe the homeless because it makes them feel better. People pursue justice because they fear to live under autocracy or anarchy. People even forgive because it makes them feel better or even superior. If you want to make the sacrifice that is the undeniable witness to faith in Jesus Christ and the power of His forgiveness and love to change this world and open to us the next one, then we do it most uniquely when we ask forgiveness for our offenses.

I ask your forgiveness for the times I have offended or disappointed you. I pray we will all have a heartfelt contrition, and the grace and courage to ask forgiveness of all those we have offended, so that we can offer that humble and appropriate sacrifice to Jesus as we come to the altar rail to receive his Body and Blood.

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