

Sermon for Morning Prayer Trinity XXII

Lessons:

First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirtieth Verse of the twenty-seventh Chapter of the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus.

“... Malice and wrath, even these are abominations; and the sinful man shall have them both. “He that revengeth shall find vengeance from the Lord, and he will surely keep his sins [in remembrance.] Forgive thy neighbour the hurt that he hath done unto thee, so shall thy sins also be forgiven when thou prayest. One man beareth hatred against another, and doth he seek pardon from the Lord? He sheweth [SHOW-eth] no mercy to a man, which is like himself: and doth he ask forgiveness of his own sins? If he that is but flesh nourish hatred, who will intreat for pardon of his sins? Remember thy end, and let enmity cease; [remember] corruption and death, and abide in the commandments. Remember the commandments, and bear no malice to thy neighbour: [remember] the covenant of the Highest, and wink at ignorance.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

Second Lesson: Here beginneth the seventh Verse of the eighteenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.

“Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh! Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire. Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven. For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost. How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that

sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.

“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “Forgive thy neighbour the hurt that he hath done unto thee, so shall thy sins also be forgiven when thou prayest. One man beareth hatred against another, and doth he seek pardon from the Lord? He sheweth [**SHOW-eth**] no mercy to a man, which is like himself: and doth he ask forgiveness of his own sins? If he that is but flesh nourish hatred, who will intreat for pardon of his sins?”
In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

We live in a society in which ever-decreasing numbers of adults have been exposed to the sort of pre-Confirmation instruction that used to be universal in the Episcopal and Roman Catholic Churches and even, to a considerable extent, among Lutherans. Thus it is only a diminishing portion of our population that has ever received sound training in the theology of the Sacraments.

For this reason, it is not surprising that when the topic of forgiveness is discussed in the news media or elsewhere in the public *fora*, it is usually discussed from a position of fundamental ignorance as to the Christian understanding of what

forgiveness means. When the subject does come up, it almost invariably involves the victims of some horrific crime who are being interviewed by news personnel who carefully lead these victims into a tearful declaration that, despite how repulsive the crime was, they have “forgiven” its perpetrator.

This type of “sound bite” forgiveness is a unilateral action whereby persons who have been injured or offended confer their forgiveness on the ones who injured them, and where the ones who have trespassed by inflicting that hurt have never made any request to be forgiven. Nor do these public discussions ever touch upon the fact that the “forgiveness” granted under these conditions is a meaningless sham which does not constitute Christian forgiveness but does constitute the Deadly Sin of Pride.

Theme:

Contrary to the way the unconverted world conceives of it, true forgiveness is not a unilateral blessing that one person confers, unasked and unexpected, on another, like a tip or a gratuity or a bonus at work. Christians do not do this. For one thing, it is patronizing, because it conveys the message that we are somehow better or more powerful than the person on whom we are conferring this meaningless “benefit”. For another thing, it is presumptuous, because it conveys the message that we can take over and perform a function that is properly God’s alone to perform.

True forgiveness is not unilateral, a one-way transmission from one who believes he or she has been harmed to one who is believed to have done that harm. Instead, true forgiveness is mutual, a two-way conversation conducted according to rules that God has laid down, rules that we are not free to alter for ourselves.

Development:

1. God is always a party when we truly and properly forgive another person.

If anyone doubts that God is an essential party to every conversation in which we forgive someone else or in which we obtain forgiveness from someone else, that doubter has only to look at some of the familiar formulae we regularly recite in the Church. One of these is that phrase from the Lord’s Prayer, in which we ask God to forgive us our personal sins: “And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive them who trespass against us.”

“*As we forgive* them who trespass against us.” Does this condition not make clear that God’s forgiving us is not only linked to our forgiving our fellow men and women, but that the two occasions of forgiveness, when we ask God to forgive our sins against Him and when others ask us to forgive their trespasses against us, follow the same pattern or methodology?

Scripture says they do: “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” And again, “And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

In this connection, it is instructive to look at the “General Rubrics”, or service directions, which appear in the Book of Common Prayer immediately following the text of “The Order for The Administration of the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion”. In other words, these service directions instruct and guide the Priest who is celebrating the Sacrament that is most vital to the ongoing life of the individual Christian and of the Christian community.

On pages 84 and 85 of the American prayer book, we read:

“If among those who come to be partakers of the Holy Communion, the Minister shall know any to be an open and notorious evil liver, or to have done any wrong to his neighbours by word or deed, so that the Congregation be thereby offended; he shall advertise him, that he presume not to come to the Lord’s Table, until he have openly declared himself to have truly repented and amended his former evil life, that the Congregation may thereby be satisfied; and that he hath recompensed the parties to whom he hath done wrong; or at least declare himself to be in full purpose so to do, as soon as he conveniently may.”

That paragraph clearly applies to God’s forgiveness of us: we cannot presume to come and receive God’s central Mystery, His gift of Himself to us, unless we have fulfilled the preconditions for His forgiveness of us. The next paragraph tells us how that process, by which God forgives us, also applies to how we forgive our neighbors and how our neighbors forgive us:

“The same order [that is, as in the case of an open and notorious sinner] shall the Minister use with those, betwixt whom he perceiveth malice and hatred to reign; not suffering them to be partakers of the Lord’s Table, until he know them to be reconciled. And if one of the parties, so at variance, be content to forgive from the bottom of his heart all that the other hath trespassed against him, and to make amends for that wherein he himself hath offended; and the other party will not be persuaded to a godly unity, but remain still in his forwardness and malice; the Minister in that case ought to admit the penitent person to the Holy Communion, and not him that is obstinate.”

In other words, just as we cannot come to the altar rail and receive into ourselves the Presence of God when we are actually separated from God by our sins, so, too, we cannot come and receive into ourselves that Presence when we are similarly separated from our neighbors by our or their sins. They, after all, are God’s own people to exactly the same extent as we ourselves are.

The General Rubric in the Book of Common Prayer is itself drawn directly from one of Our Lord’s express injunctions as recorded in the Gospels: “Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.”

2. God requires forgiveness to follow a strict threepart outline or program.

The General Rubrics already quoted sets out a specific step-by-step program for forgiveness:

First, the person who has caused harm must repent of having done so: “that he presume not to come to the Lord’s Table, until he have openly declared himself to have truly repented....” This is an essential step, laid down by God, and it is one that is completely ignored by the patronizing, unilateral sort of so-called “forgiveness” that we discussed earlier.

Implicit in that declaration of repentance is an **express request** for forgiveness, as when in the Sacrament of Penance the penitent states, “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned”.

This declaration of repentance and request for forgiveness must be truly sincere, and the General Rubric tells us that mere words of sorrow are not enough. There must be more to back up the outward expression of contrition. This something more forms the second and third steps of the forgiveness conversation.

The second step is that the one who seeks forgiveness must have corrected the lifestyle, or associations, or actions that originally led him into doing the harm which is now at issue. In the words of the General Rubric: “he have openly declared himself to have truly ... amended his former evil life”

This, by the way, is the answer to those who criticize the Catholic Sacrament of Penance because they say it is a “cop out” for those who have done wrong, that is, that they can run into the “box”, make a *pro forma* confession, receive a symbolic slap on the wrist for a penance, and then go on their merry ways, committing the same sins over and over again.

It is true that the Priest in the confessional may be fooled as to whether the penitent is sincere in this expressed intention to amend his life, but God is never fooled. Absolution is always conditional and the condition precedent is that the penitent is sincere in all phases of the Sacrament.

Any absolution that is obtained by lying to the Priest is void. Furthermore, not only is such an absolution obtained by fraud of no effect whatever in remitting the sins that were confessed, by itself it constitutes a new mortal sin, which only plunges the false penitent into even deeper water.

Nor is it sufficient for this contrition and purpose of amendment to be mere lip-service. The General Rubric requires “that he hath recompensed the parties to whom he hath done wrong; or at least declare himself to be in full purpose to do so, as soon as he conveniently may.”

In today’s slang phrase, the penitent must not only talk the talk, he must walk the walk. So when we purport to confer forgiveness on someone who has never asked us for it, or who has asked but has not fulfilled the preconditions for it that God has laid down, we are doing that person no favor at all. Instead, we are misleading him, letting him think that he is all right when, in truth, he remains in mortal danger because he still has not reconciled himself to God.

It is our responsibility as Christians not to shortcircuit God's plan by interfering with His program of forgiveness based on true repentance.

3. Although God alone controls the circumstances under which someone may be forgiven, each of us has complete control over whether we harbor grudges.

If we are not to forgive others at our own whim, however, this leaves a glaring question. If we cannot, and moreover should not try, to forgive those who have never properly asked for our forgiveness, what should we do with regard to the hurts those unrepentant people have inflicted on us, and with regard to the sins they have committed against us?

Here we must rely on a critical distinction. We cannot forgive those who have not properly asked for it or who have not properly demonstrated that they are entitled to it. However, it is one thing for us to withhold forgiveness from those who have injured us, purely on these technical grounds and because we do not wish to usurp God's own prerogatives.

It is quite another thing for us to holding grudges against them. Let me say that again: not forgiving someone does not equal holding a grudge against that person; it merely means that person has not yet met the preconditions to forgiveness.

Conclusion:

Holding a grudge, like patronizingly conferring an empty forgiveness, is a unilateral act. It takes place entirely within ourselves, is solely an act of our own personal will, and it has no effect whatever on the person who has harmed us. The only person who can ever be harmed by a grudge is the person who harbors it.

Therefore, for our own health and well-being, we should let go of the anger, hard feelings, hatreds, and ill-will that we feel for others, well-justified though those feelings may be. No matter how grievous the harm that has been inflicted on us, our own internal response to that harm, if malicious in nature, can only poison our own lives, and therefore our own relationship with God. It can never inflict the slightest harm on the people toward whom it is directed. And if we do manage to release all of those negative feelings, and to let them leak away out of our minds and spirits like rainwater down a gutter, then we will be prepared truly to forgive those who come to us properly to ask for our forgiveness. On the other hand, unless we have

made this preparation, by letting go of our grudges, we will find it very hard to respond properly to that plea.

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*The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister
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1 Book of Common Prayer (PECUSA 1928), Lectionary of 1943.

2 Ecclesiasticus 28:2-5 (KJV).

3 The Lord's Prayer, The Order for Morning Prayer, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 7 (PECUSA 1928). Almost all traditional BOOKS OF COMMON PRAYER use correct grammar for this phrase, placing the indirect object "them" in the dative case. Only the American PRAYER BOOK inexplicably altered this to the incorrect "those" in the nominative case.

4 St. Matthew 6:14-15 (KJV).

5 St. Mark 11:25-26 (KJV); cf. St. Luke 11:4.

6 General Rubrics, The Order for The Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 84-85 (PECUSA 1928).

7 Id. 85.

8 St. Matthew 5:23-26 (KJV).

9 General Rubrics, supra Note 7.

10 Id.

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