

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYERⁱ
THE TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

The Rev, Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

The Lessons:ⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighth Verse of the seventh Chapter of Zechariah.ⁱⁱⁱ

“And the word of the LORD came unto Zechariah, saying, Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew [SHOW] mercy and compassions every man to his brother: And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart. But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear. Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the LORD of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets: therefore came a great wrath from the LORD of hosts. Therefore it is come to pass, that as he cried, and they would not hear; so they cried, and I would not hear, saith [SETH] the LORD of hosts: But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them, that no man passed through nor returned: for they laid the pleasant land desolate.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-first Verse of the eighteenth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.^{iv}

“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 [SETH] unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

“Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to

be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. So when his fellowservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “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 [SETH] unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.”^v In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

If a man beats his wife and then asks her to forgive him, does she have to take him back? If a woman steals from her employer and then asks to be forgiven, is the employer permitted to fire her? If a man is addicted to alcohol, do we have to forgive him every time he gets drunk and then sobers up and asks for forgiveness? I believe it was such situations as these that prompted St. Peter to ask, in today’s Second

Lesson, “How many times shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Seven times, maybe?”

Peter has heard Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount that if we expect God to forgive us, we have to forgive each other. He has learned from Jesus to pray “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” But Peter is getting tired of being victimized again and again by the same person, and I don’t blame him. So he asks, “How many times shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Seven times, maybe?” And Jesus replies, “Not just seven times, but seventy times seven.”

That’s not the answer Peter wanted to hear, but if you just think about what Jesus says about forgiveness, you might put the question this way: “How many times do I want God to forgive me?”

The answer, of course, is that I know I’m going to keep on sinning no matter how hard I try not to and I want God to forgive me every time. But does that mean that the abused wife must remain with her perverted husband? Does it mean that the employer must continue to allow his employee to steal from him? Does it mean that the spouse of an alcoholic must become an enabler of his habit? I don’t believe it does.

The comic strip called “Peanuts” runs an episode every year at the beginning of the football season. Lucy holds a football on the ground in position for a place kick. She tells Charlie Brown to run up to the ball as fast as he can and give a good hard boot. Every time that has happened in the past Lucy has pulled the ball away at the last second, and Charlie has found himself flat on his back with his head spinning and his leg hurting. But every year, Lucy assures him that this time it will be different.

Now I ask you, in light of today’s passage from the Gospel, what are Charlie Brown’s obligations as a Christian boy?

It seems to me that Charlie must forgive Lucy for all the times she has tricked him and hurt him in the past. But I do not believe he is obliged to allow her to continue to trick him and hurt him. I see nothing in this Gospel or anywhere else in Scriptures that requires us to believe

people when we know they are lying, or to trust people that we know do not have our best interests at heart, or to put ourselves in harm's way to satisfy someone's perverted needs. I believe Charlie has the right to tell Lucy that he forgives her for what she has done in the past, but he simply is no longer willing to do what she wants him to do.

Forgiveness means that we do not carry grudges and nurse old wounds. It means that we give up plans and fantasies to exact revenge. It does not mean that we fail to learn from past experience. Neither does it mean that we shield the offender from the consequences of his actions. Forgiveness restores a broken relationship, but nothing can undo what has been done.

“The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on,
Nor all your piety nor wit can call it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all your tears wash out a word of it.”
(Omar Khayyam, *The Rubaiyat*.)

If a man gets out a bottle of wine and drops in on the floor while his wife is preparing dinner, what is the effect of the apology he makes? His wife, after expressing her displeasure, forgives him. But he still has a mess to clean up and he still has to eat his dinner without a glass of wine.

Forgiveness does not attempt to undo what has been done. What it does do is relieve those who have been victimized of the burden of anger and the need for revenge.

It takes a lot of psychic energy to carry around a grudge. It tends to immobilize us because we see ourselves as victims, unable to help ourselves and therefore in bondage. Forgiveness dissipates that energy and enables us to reassert control of our own lives.

So many of us carry around memories of how we have been mistreated. Those memories range from serious forms of abuse to personal insults and being made fun of. We remember when we were rejected for a position we wanted, or when someone was preferred ahead of us. We remember when our car was vandalized or our home was broken into or we were beaten up in a fight. Some of those memories go

back to our childhood, and some are as recent as yesterday when someone beat us out of parking space.

In our anger we think about what we would like to do in retaliation for those injustices. But the Gospel tells us that it is precisely such thoughts that we have to give up. Vengeance belongs to God alone, and it is never really as sweet as we expect.

Sometimes we try to cover up the memories of pain inflicted on us because the people who abused us were our parents or our siblings or our spouses whom we desperately want to love and be loved by. But before we can forgive, we have to confront the reality of the pain. Even if the people who have hurt us are dead, we have to confront their ghosts and re-experience the pain. That is part of the cost of forgiveness. Even God had to suffer in order to forgive us. We have to acknowledge the reality of the pain and then let it go, and with it, the desire for revenge.

What forgiveness really comes down to, I believe, is seeing yourself on the same moral level as those who have done you wrong. They are victims just as you are. They were driven by forces that they could not control. You can pity them for that because you know what it is like to be so driven.

The New Testament teaches throughout that anyone who presents himself before God as morally superior to others will be judged by the strictest standards of divine justice. If you do not want that, then you must learn to be as generous with your forgiveness as you wish for God to be with his.

By carrying a grudge you assert a certain moral superiority over someone. They are wrong and you are right, and by keeping them in the wrong, you smugly maintain that feeling of moral superiority. That is what ultimately brought down the man in today's parable. He could not see himself as on a par with those who owed him a debt, but that is what God requires of those who seek his forgiveness.

Conclusion:

My fellow sinners, we all need to learn to forgive, not for the sake of others, but for our own sakes. Vengeance belongs to God precisely because He alone is righteous. When you seek vengeance for wrongs done to you, you are really asserting that you are righteous, as God is righteous, and God will strictly examine you to see if that is so. I don't really want that, and I don't think you do either.

“And Peter said unto Jesus, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Til seven times? Jesus saith [SETH] unto him, I say not unto thee ‘Until seven times,’ but ‘until seventy times seven.’”

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St. David's Anglican Catholic Church
Charlottesville, Virginia
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ⁱ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” Concerning the Service of the Church, *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

ⁱⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943)*, *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* xxxix (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Zechariah 7:8-end (KJV)*.

^{iv} *St. Matthew 18:21-end (KJV)*.

^v *St. Matthew 18:21-22 (KJV)*.