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The Church Forgives as God Forgives

Just as members of the Church call sinners to repentance (our focus last Sunday), so believers forgive as God forgives. God's forgiveness to us is essential. If God doesn't forgive us for sinning, we cannot have God. And so God forgave us on the Savior's cross and God forgives us every day. But forgiving others is also essential. If we believe that Jesus forgives us, we must forgive others. God calls us to model our forgiveness on his: boundless and free love and based on the sacrifice of Christ.

Sermon Ephesians 4:29-52

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Introduction – The Gospel for today is Jesus's well-known parable about the unmerciful servant. When we were growing up it was read in church every year at about this time in the fall; now we hear it every three years at about the same time. The parable is about a king who forgave a debt that could never be repaid and it's about the debtor who turned around and refused to forgive a debt that could be repaid easily. This is how the parable ends: **Then the master called the servant in. You wicked servant, he said, I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you? In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.** That's really scary, don't you think? Whenever I read this parable in church I always hesitate to end with "The Gospel of the Lord" because it sounds like the opposite of good news!

You know why the parable is scary, right? It's scary because there are lots of times when **we** don't forgive brothers and sisters from the heart. Somebody talks behind our back or ignores us or insults us or cheats us or wounds us in some way and we don't like it. We may not strike back or even talk back; we won't light any big fires. But the anger smolders and simmers and seethes and it won't go away. We can be nice to those people and maybe even smile at them, but the wound is still open and the hurt doesn't go away. And maybe it lasts for years. And then the time comes when we hear the parable of the fate of the unmerciful servant and we remember how Jesus ended this parable: **This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.** That's scary and it bothers me to hear it. Maybe it bothers you, too.

Whenever we hear this parable, we have to remember that the parable of the unmerciful servant is really not about the unmerciful servant; the parable is really about the merciful king. Jesus told the parable after Peter asked, **How many times shall I forgive my brother?** Peter suggested seven times which was more generous than

the usual Jewish practice of three times. Jesus said, **I tell you, not seven times but seventy-seven times**—and maybe he said seventy times seven times: 490 times. And then he told the parable to make his point: Forgive one another in the same way the king forgave this servant. In other words, forgive one another in the same way God has forgiven you.

We'll never forgive people or love people just because we're afraid of God's anger. The only way we'll ever begin to forgive is to look at God's love. That's the point of Jesus' parable and that's the point Paul makes in the Second Reading for today from Ephesians 4 and 5. The truth is

God's Model Moves Us to Ministry

Those of you who came to last Sunday's Bible Class on the Letter to the Ephesians remember that Paul was writing to Christians; he called them **God's holy people and people faithful in Christ Jesus**. It doesn't surprise us that Paul urges Christians to say and do **what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen**. People's physical needs are important, but their faith needs are more important. When we love, we build up the faith of people; when we're angry, we tear down the faith of people. So how we act toward others and even how we feel about others is always going to impact their walk with Jesus. Forgiving one another is really an important part of our personal gospel ministry to one another.

When Paul began this section on Christian living, he wrote, **You were taught to put off your old self and to be made new in the attitude of your minds**. When we refuse to forgive or when we cling to bitterness, we're putting that old self back on again. When that happens, according to Paul, **we grieve the Holy Spirit**. The Spirit created faith in our hearts, he enlightens us, he empowers us, he puts his seal on us—and then we bear grudges and harbor resentment and we jump into the same old pig pen we used to live in. We can't minister to others when the old self controls us. We can't drive the devil out of others when we let the devil live in us.

So don't let the devil live in you, Paul wrote. **Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths**. The word Paul uses means rotten or putrid. Think of the demeaning and belittling words we sometimes hear from politicians and sports stars to put down their opponents. Think of words people use to mock people from minority cultures or ethnic groups; I won't give examples because you've all heard the words and know what I mean. If we use words like those, we either encourage other Christians to use them or we lead people to doubt Christianity: How can Christians use those words? In both cases, we damage faith. Paul outlines a process of evil that moves from one sin to worse sins. It starts with **bitterness**, resentment that seethes inside us. It moves to **rage** when bitterness explodes into words. Then to **brawling and anger**, hot arguments which lead to **slander** and name-calling. A refusal to forgive inevitably moves to **malice** and everything evil. Our eyes focus on fighting, not on faith. Our thoughts and words become crass and cruel and our eyes move away from Christ and the cross. Our gospel ministry to others becomes impossible.

Paul wants to see the opposite in the Ephesians and God wants to see the opposite in us. Paul wrote, **Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other. Walk in the way of love**. Easier said than done, right? Tit for tat lives in all of us and eye for an eye is the American way. People attack and the people they attack counter-attack—or they run to court and sue. Getting even is the name of the game. We don't see much kindness and compassion and forgiveness and love in the news or even in our own circle of friends. There aren't many examples, nothing much to imitate, not many models.

But there is one model and Paul knew it. **Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God**. We'll never be moved to forgive by the harsh punishment the king handed out to that unmerciful servant. The motive to forgive comes in the mercy of the king who forgave the servant's impossible debt. That's what God has done for us.

Think of some of the things that people have done to you over the years that upset you, things that you found or things you still find hard to forgive. An insult? A put-down? Maybe even a few of each, maybe even a bunch. Now think about how many insults and how many put-downs and how many rebellions and how much disobedience God has forgiven for you. Too many to count, right. Actually countless when you think about it. No conditions, either. Nothing like “Be nice and do more and I’ll forgive you.” Just “I forgive you.” We sang in the psalm this morning, **As far as the east is from the west, so far has the Lord removed our transgressions from us.**

Think of what it costs you to forgive. A smile, a handshake, a kind word, and a little forgetfulness? Not much more. Now think what it cost God to forgive you. He replaced his anger with perfect love, he sent his Son to endure your punishment, he accepted his blood as payment for your sin, and he raised his Son to assure you of victory. That’s love. Paul wrote to the Romans, **Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**

We all know what it’s like to be hurt or insulted or ignored. We’ve all felt the pain of the put down. And we all know the struggle that comes with forgiving and forgetting. Sometimes we’ve succeeded in this and sometimes we haven’t. But in the parable of the merciful king—and that king is actually our forgiving God—we have a model for our ministry and service to one another. St. John wrote: **Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.** And as we live in that model, we’ll serve one another in love.