

Sermon Text: Luke 7:36-50

Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This woman in the Gospel reading, who was forgiven much, loved much! Loved so much and was so grateful, so thankful that it seemed unseemly to those around. I have observed the opposite to be true as well. People who hold onto hurts tend to hurt others much as well as themselves.

A man was bitten by a mad dog, and he didn't get treatment in time so it wasn't working. The treatment for rabies wasn't working. The doctor told him to go ahead, he'd better just get ready and prepare his last will and testament, and so the man began to write. He began to write, and he began to write, and he began to write, and the doctor said, "That certainly is a lengthy will that you're making out!" The man looked up angrily, and he said, "Will nothing! I'm writing down a list of people I want to bite!"

Not all bites are intentional. Sometimes we hurt each other without meaning to, without knowing.

As a child, I was mildly interested in foreign stamps and old stamps, and I still have my book that I started when I was nine or ten years old in my office. I was interested, but I really didn't know much about the hobby. All I'd ever seen were individual stamps pasted into the book, and you'd find the picture where they were supposed to go, and you pasted them right there, and that's what I did. Well, one day in a very unusual move, my father brought me a whole sheet of stamps, and I had no idea that a whole sheet of stamps was more valuable than individual stamps. I just didn't have any idea. All I'd ever seen were individual, and so I tore them apart, and my father became very, very angry, and I didn't know why because I did not understand the value of the gift.

Forgiveness is a gift from God, and I think we must first be betrayed, be hurt, be wronged, be put down, be cast out, be left angry before we know just how valuable and how costly the gift of forgiveness is. That's not a problem because soon enough in all of our lives those things happen to us, and soon enough we all come to learn how costly it is to forgive.

I saw some old friends this past week, and in speaking to a young woman, well, no, she's my age! A woman, and I surreptitiously picked her brain for this very sermon. You have to be careful when you talk to preachers because they are always working on a sermon, and you might be in it. I asked her, "How would you feel if you knew that every misdeed, every angry word, every wasted expenditure, every haughty judgment of others, all the harm you caused others or yourself, all the guilt was absolutely and completely forgiven?" She sighed, and she said, "I would feel wonderful!"

We are all sinners. God loves us anyway and forgives our sins. We say it, we sing it, but quite a few simply do not believe it in their heart of hearts. God in Christ made peace by

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, June 17, 2007

the blood of His cross. The seriousness of sin and the reality of death and the love of God are shown on that cross all at once! Apparently, we simply don't know the value of that gift. We don't sing like a weight has been lifted from us. We don't pray and we don't praise like God has given us an unfathomable gift. From where I stand, I can see the first three or four rows; we don't look like we feel all that wonderful! I do know, as I said at the 8:28 service, that you say, Jim, you're one to talk. You hardly ever smile. I have documented proof that I smiled last Thursday. The purpose of the church is wrapped up in this message. God so loved the world that God gave His only begotten Son to show us just how much He loves us, how far God will stoop to give us love, forgiveness and grace and an eternal embrace that we might be with Him forever. And if loved and forgiven, and if forgiven and reconciled, and that means we can have peace. We can have peace as a gift from God in our souls. Do we? And if not, why not?

We can never be at peace our neighbors or family until we get that peace first from God. That wonderful feeling of being, knowing, accepting that you are forgiven completely! When we possess for ourselves the wonder of God's forgiveness, it does not end there. It begins there! For the wonderful work of the forgiven is to forgive, to forgive others. To forgive is to acknowledge that only love can overcome the evil that divides and alienates us one from another and one from our true selves. To forgive is to acknowledge that only love can heal our wounded relationships. To forgive is to acknowledge that only love can clear away the debris that gathers from our pasts.

It's a wonderful thing to be able to forgive. It is a heavy weight to carry around old hurts and old guilt as if they were precious things! We do carry those heavy weights, and we open, and we look, and we keep these things, and we bring them out, not to feel wonderful, but to feel that hurt, and to feel that guilt all over again. I wonder why! What harm we do by not accepting as true that God has forgiven us, and given us permission and reason to feel wonderful.

Hear once more to your very core. When we possess for ourselves the wonder of God's forgiveness, it does not end there. It begins there. For the wonderful work of the forgiven is to forgive.

We all remember another famous story of a similar woman from here mentioned in Luke and the Gospel of John. The woman caught in the very act of adultery, she was caught. She was guilty. She was humiliated, standing in the middle of a circle of self-righteous men with rocks in their hands. She was afraid. She was distressed. She may have been angry because her partner in the act in which she was caught was let go. Though our sins may be different, we are all sinners nonetheless, and so I'm going to ask you to identify with her, standing before Jesus in that situation, and hear to your utter astonishment, hear Him say, "Receive your life back again. The page is wiped clean. You are forgiven. You can go now. Your life has been given back to you."

This is the central experience of Christian faith. The power of the cross, which makes forgiveness possible, is the mystery and majesty of the love of God. Christianity is not

simply another moral teaching. It is an experience of standing guilty and condemned, and then by the power of God’s grace, through the cross of Christ, receiving our lives back again.

In today’s reading, she who was forgiven much, loved much, and it seemed so unseemly to everyone around. In fact, it’s kind of difficult to read. To Jesus, I think it brought a smile, a smile of recognition that she recognized exactly how wonderful the Gospel is! How wonderful it feels to have that weight lifted and to be able to cast away the hurt and the guilt and start over this time with the power of forgiveness for you and for others!

There’s a story of an artist, who was going around his section of the city, and he was looking for characters, which he wanted to paint. He found a beggar on the street, and he told the man if he came to his studio tomorrow that he would love to paint his portrait, and he would pay him. The next day, the beggar appeared at the artist’s studio door, and when the artist opened the door and saw him, he saw him dressed up, wearing a neatly pressed suit, a clean shirt, polished shoes, a tie. He had taken a bath, shaved off his whiskers, brushed his hair, and brushed his teeth. When the artist saw him, he was angry! He sent him away. He said, “That’s not who you are!” That’s not who you are! That’s not who I wanted to paint!

We are here today, very presentable, very respectable. We have on our antiperspirant. We have used toothpaste and mouthwash and hair stuff and makeup, and we’re all cleaned up, and we look good, but God sees our hearts and knows that’s not who we are. It would be a lot more appropriate looking like beggars because that is who we are on the deepest level before God. What we need is forgiveness, and nothing we can do, no matter how we scrub, we can’t earn it! We know how much we’ve hurt others and ourselves by the things we’ve done or failed to do. We know how we’ve taken advantage of other people, manipulated other people, and tried to control the lives of other people. We know that there are people in the real world who are dead today because we did not share our excess resources. We know that there are people, who have been lonely for a long time, and we haven’t been there to see them, and we could have been there, and we are the ones they’re waiting for. We know there are people who have rejected Jesus as Lord of their lives because of the way we professed Christian faith, but didn’t really live it in their midst. We know that there is so much that brings us into the circle of the guilty for which we are deserving of condemnation. That is why, if we’re honest about it, we come here to accept as humble beggars the wonderful gift of forgiveness.

I speak of sin only to raise up in our estimation what a wonderful gift forgiveness is, and that opportunity of new life we have through Christ. Those who really know as this woman in the Gospel did how much they need forgiveness are the ones who rejoice in the name of Jesus and sing boldly the hymns and smile when they pray and forgive others, really forgive others because they have the spiritual reserve of the Holy Spirit to empower them to do so. It is a wonderful thing, and too often even life-long church members miss the wonder of God’s grace and complete forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Too often even church members are trying to earn it and earn it and earn it and buy it. It’s a gift!

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, June 17, 2007

Forgiveness is a miracle of grace on the receiving end and on the giving end. On our own we can't get it, and on our own we won't give it.

The poet, John Greenleaf Whittier, wrote a great poem that ends with this line, “Heaven's gate is not open to him who comes along. Save another's soul and thou shalt save thine own.” The forgiveness we have is given to share. The love that we have is given to share. The faith that we have is meant to be reflected in our lives for others.

Now, we've heard a saying. We've heard this saying. All of us have. To hate the sin, but love the sinner. Hate the sin, but love the sinner. Some of us say it as a cliché – don't really believe it. I'm doing the C. S. Lewis on Wednesday nights. It's not too late to get in on that. C. S. Lewis says this about that saying. He says, “For a long time I used to think that this is a silly distinction. How you can hate what a man does and not hate the man? But years later it occurred to me that there was one man to whom I had been doing this all my life, namely myself. However much I might dislike my own cowardice or conceit or greed, I went on loving myself! There had never been the slightest difficulty about it; in fact, the very reason why I hated my sins is that I loved the man. Because I love myself, I was sorry to find that I was the sort of man who did those bad things.”

Now it probably seems strange to some of you that on my Father's Day sermon, I'm speaking all about forgiveness. It does not seem strange to me. I've been here, this is the beginning of my fourth year, and after you know me awhile, and as one of my members told me last week, it takes a long time to get used to you, Jim! I think I hear an Amen. I begin to share a little more of myself, and forgiveness and Father's Day are tied together in this way for me. I cannot recall a single word of encouragement from my Father growing up. I cannot recall a single hug as a child, a single pat on the back, a time of helping with homework or reading a story or building a project. Not one! Do I love my Father? Yes, and not a qualified yes, not just because God said I had to love my Father. It's a yes. I simply do. Because I have come to understand how he got to be the way many men of his generation are. He was good at work. He was a doctor. He was consumed with work. His emotions were pretty much shut down. Boys don't cry, and his generation believed that. Men don't hug, and his generation learned that. He is the way he was taught to be. Would he like to have been different? Of course! Would I have enjoyed a more involved and more emotionally available father? Of course! But I had what I had, and I have what I have. I love him not for what he might have been, but for what he is, faults and all, because that is the way I have come to understand God loves me.

You see forgiveness is not just something that we need, comes to us, and stops with us. It is to be passed on and to be seen in the bigger scheme. I can forgive other people's faults because I have come to understand that that is the way God loves and forgives me. That, brothers and sisters in Christ, is the most honest and the most helpful Father's Day message I can give. Amen.