

<i>Date Preached</i>	13-Sept-2020	<i>Date Initiated</i>	30-Aug-2020
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Yr A, Pr 19 (Tr 2)
<i>Main Text</i>			

" Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you? "



"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Or, in the more contemporary translation in the Prayer Book, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." How many times a month ... or a week ... or even a day do we pray these familiar words? And yet, in my experience, this is the only part of the Lord's Prayer that tends to give people pause, for it is the only part of the prayer that isn't adoration or petition: our either praising God or asking God to do something. Right there, tucked into the middle of the prayer, is our acknowledgement of the Christian duty we have to treat others ... as God treats us.

Now, we must be careful to say that this duty we recite in the Lord's Prayer is normative, rather than causative. "As *we* forgive ..." is a self-reminder of our need to forgive others, but in no way is God's forgiveness of *us* ... conditioned upon our forgiving *them*. Still, the juxtaposition of our duty right alongside the total and unmerited grace God gives us ... serves to underscore, I think, how important it is for us, as Christians, to forgive others. But *how* are we to forgive? And, for that matter, *why*?

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There is a scene in the 1990 movie *Avalon* that is a favorite in my family. It's Thanksgiving Day, and the entire Russian immigrant family whose story the movie tells—three generations; more than 30 people, in all—is sitting at the table, ready eat ... but waiting, as always, for the habitually late eldest brother Gabriel to arrive. Eventually, they can wait no longer, and they cut the turkey. Almost an hour later, Gabriel arrives, and he boggles and sputters to discover that *this* is the year the family finally didn't wait for him. He vows never to share another holiday with them again ... and doesn't. Gabriel promises he will never forgive, and, however bitterly, he remains true to his word. In the narrative of the film, Gabriel's enduring stubbornness is the first crack in the close-knit family's frame and ultimately leads to its disintegration.

To refuse to forgive ... or to think that we have already forgiven enough, as Jesus teaches Peter in the first part of today's Gospel lesson ... is not a decision Christians get to make. We are to forgive *extravagantly*. It's not clear in the Greek whether Jesus tells Peter to forgive seventy-seven times or *seventy-times-seven* times, but *either* way, since seven was the number of perfection, Jesus' point—exaggerated for didactic purposes, of course—is that we are to forgive *beyond perfectly*: to not stop at what may seem reasonable to us. For when we don't ... when we dig in our heels ... we become, like Gabriel, frozen in our judgment ... trapped in our own anger and resentment. And sometimes, our mule headedness can also cripple, in guilt and regret, those who genuinely crave our forgiveness.

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A later scene in *Avalon* teaches us a different lesson about forgiveness. After a young boy plays with fire—not for the first time—in the basement of his father's brand-new department store, an inferno destroys the store on its opening day. No one is hurt, but the business is permanently ruined. When the boy's father returns home after the devastating fire, the boy bravely confesses his transgression. After almost blithely reminding his son of how *often* he's already been warned not to play with fire, the father immediately forgives him and puts his arms around him. Now, as it turns out, the father knows the fire started in the electrical system—his son wasn't responsible for it. Nevertheless, the young boy's dangerous habit, which his father has just forgiven *again*, still poses a significant risk to his family and to others.

Forgiveness, mental health professionals tell us, is the way we free *ourselves* of the hurt others have inflicted upon us. Sometimes it can also free those who've hurt us from their own guilt and shame. But while these releases are both important and gracious, they can't simply paper over the fact that someone hurt us ... that they took (or sought to take) something from us they had no right to take. If forgiveness is to be healthy and constructive, the *release* it provides must be met by *either* a good faith promise of the forgiven us not to hurt us again ... or by our own action to avoid our being hurt again. An endless cycle of our being victimized and then assuaging the conscience of our assailant's guilt and then being victimized again pains God. It is *not* Christ's message to us ... or to anyone else.

We are, then, to forgive generously and freely, but not at the cost of our own personhood, our own human dignity. Said another way, our forgiving others must *balance* maintaining our own sense of belovedness in God, on the one hand ... and our sharing that belovedness with those who have hurt us, on the other.

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But let's face it: The more vexing question is usually not *how* we are to forgive, but the sometimes fraught, sometimes even raw question of *why*. *Why* does Christ expect us to forgive others, especially if they don't even care how they've hurt us?

In the parable Jesus tells today, the king makes a choice: Rather than throwing the servant (who, in fact, is probably an important minister in the king's court) and the servant's family into prison and a life of misery because he cannot repay a debt of truly staggering proportions—the equivalent of hundreds of millions of dollars—the king quickly and selflessly chooses to forgive the servant's debt in its entirety. Neither a temporary reprieve nor a modest reduction, the king's choice is to free the servant of his *entire* burden; the king's choice is to pay the cost of his servant's mistake (or, perhaps, even his dishonesty) himself. The outcome that the parable telegraphs—the norm it intends us to see and expect—is that the servant should now go and do likewise. The correct response is for him to share the undeserved largesse *he's* received ... with those who are indebted to *him*. Think of the newly re-born Ebenezer Scrooge at the end of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

But, somehow, the unbelievable magnitude of the grace he's been shown by the king entirely escapes the evil servant. Ever the cold-hearted *first-act* Scrooge ... so obsessed with the pittance he is owed that he's blind to the over-abundance he's already received ... he bitterly—tenaciously—withholds his forgiveness and makes his debtors pay and pay and pay, until they are wrung dry.

Now, while there was no *stated* condition between the king and the servant ... "I'll forgive you if *you* forgive others" ... Jesus makes clear the only right response to the king's actions: What has been done for you, without the least bit of deserving on your part, you CANnot but emulate for others. Does not, Jesus asks us, the undeserved ... for-all-things and for-all-times ... forgiveness of the Cross and the Empty Tomb inspire in you a desire—a need—to share the same spirit of forgiveness with others? Don't your cold calculations of who owes you what ... pale in comparison to the debt *you've* been forgiven? Why, Jesus asks, do you insist on settling debts of pennies when I have forgiven you a debt so large it threatened your entire life? Our forgiveness of others plays no part in securing our redemption or gaining God's love ... but it is our *only right response* to them.

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Today, following a brief but significant hiatus, we return, as a community, to the altar; to the sacred place where we experience, repeatedly and reliably, the unmerited and unlimited grace of God again and again. Whether our communion with Christ and with one another in this sacrament is spiritual or physical, we approach this table to acknowledge and give thanks for the absolute forgiveness of all sins that Christ effected for us, with His Body. We consume His Body and Blood, by mouth or by prayer, to receive His gracious forgiveness again and make it part of our own bodies, as well. And thus always forgiven ... and also, forgiven again ... we turn from this table, go out into the world and make the only right response ... the only response consonant with the unfathomable grace we have already received: to offer the same spirit of forgiveness to those who have trespassed against us.



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