

Forgiven and Forgiving

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 33
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Daniel 12:1-3; Psalm 16;
Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25; Mark 13:1-8

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Message directed to the children of the Junior Choir:

Good morning! I've got a God pencil here – have you ever seen something like this? It's a strange pencil, isn't it? Can you tell me what makes it strange? That's right; it has no point. Yes? It has two erasers! You see, this is the pencil God uses. What does he use it to erase, then? Yes? Our sins! The mistakes we make in drawing our life. You see, God gives us the pencil that we make into a drawing that's our whole life. And when we mess up, and we look at it and see that it's messed up and we're upset that it's messed up, we ask God for forgiveness. And guess what? He just loves to come down with His special pencil and erase the mistakes and give us a second chance. Cool, isn't it? Now I'm going to talk to the bigger kids; they need a little more help.

And this message was directed to the members of the Matins Choir:

Do you remember the last time you did something really bad? Something really wrong? Hmm? I can tell when I look at you and your eyes go away from me, or look down. And the worst part of the things we do bad or do wrong, is that sometimes in the nighttime, when we're lying awake, those things come back to bug us, don't they? And the older we get, the more of those things we have. But God wants us to understand one thing: when we come to Him and ask Him, He will forgive us. He can't take away our memories, because it's not His fault that you can't remember to do your homework. He doesn't take away our memories, but He takes away the effect of the bad stuff we get into and He puts it aside. But we're human beings, and human beings like to remember stuff. And lot's of human beings remember stuff they've done wrong and they use that to trouble themselves and make themselves anxious and upset – don't do that to yourselves!

This morning you're going to receive communion, and when you do I want you to listen carefully to the words we use when we talk about Christ's blood. Jesus says, this cup (the cup of wine) is the new covenant, the new promise in my blood, for the forgiveness of sins for all people. God's only too willing to put that stuff aside and to welcome us back into a new relationship with Him.

You know how it goes with your mom and dad when you've really messed up and they get mad and upset and nobody talks and it's very quiet around the house? You know what I'm talking about, right? But when things get better, and things get right, then it's terrific to be around the house. My mom and dad used to last about two or three days for a really bad one. How long do your parents last? No don't tell me, just think about it! God's upset with us, God's anger with us, lasts only as long as it takes for us to come to him and ask to be forgiven.

And now I've got a really hard job to do. I've got to talk to the adults about this stuff. But listen in, you might enjoy the stories.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

At the first service this morning, we baptized Madelynn Alexis Cashman, she is now an adopted child of God, a sister of Christ. Before her lies a future filled with promise. The same future lies before the children and young people behind me. For the assurance is that Madelynn and these young people behind me, and we, are God's own; we are indelibly marked as God's own and we're promised life eternal. It is an enormous promise and it is granted to us as a pure gift of grace.

Second, Madelynn has the promise of her life before her. You, too, have the promise of your whole life before you. For some of us, the time we have is getting short, but there's still promise for us in how we will shape and draw our life. The really important thing to understand is that we're never alone with this; we're never alone in our growth and development. This morning, Madelynn's parents promised to teach her the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Apostle's Creed, to place in her hands the Holy Scriptures, to bring her to the services of God's house, and so on. And everybody who was here in the congregation this morning promised to pray for her and support her. She, her parents, and all of us will have the joy of seeing her creativity and her life as it unfolds before us.

We too, as a result of our own baptism have also been set on a journey of discovery and service. And we too, have been offered the promise and gift of salvation. But we also know that the journey has its glitches and its hiccups. And as we've grown, we have realized that our lives are imperfect and that they all have their blemishes and moments of heartbreak and brokenness.

But we are also children of an understanding, compassionate, and forgiving God. And that is what's at the heart of our lesson from Hebrews, the second lesson we heard read this morning. It is a forgiveness that is immediate upon our recognition of our errors, or our sins, if you will. What is it we say to one another, Yes, Lord, I have sinned but I have several excellent excuses?

Author Frank McCourt understood this very clearly. Some years ago, McCourt was working as a creative writing teacher at a high school in Manhattan. He faced the daily struggle of getting the kids to choose a subject and write creatively about it. What would it take to ignite his students' enthusiasm? To get them really motivated? Finally he found his inspiration from a forged excuse note that a student handed to him. Authentic excuse notes (those written by the

students' parents) were, according to McCourt, boring, short, and factual. That's how McCourt could always tell when a student wrote his own excuse note and forged parental signature. Those notes were more detailed and much more creative. And then McCourt had a brilliant idea. He set the students a new assignment: they were to write an excuse note from either Adam or Eve and send the note to God.

The students dug into their new assignment with focus, enthusiasm, and creativity. And soon they branched out to write excuse notes for other famous people in history: for Judas, Al Capone, Attila the Hun. And the students' writing improved tremendously. It improved so much that the school principal and superintendent took notice and praised McCourt for his ingenuity. You see, the truth is that we are pretty good at excuses.

Yet here is the strange thing about forgiveness. Forgiveness isn't about excuses. Forgiveness does not excuse our sinful conduct. We can be forgiven for driving at 90 miles an hour down Market Street in Camp Hill, and maiming and injuring someone. But we can't be excused from the consequences of that act. What God is really looking for is our honest self-awareness of the times when we forget to act like the children of God we really are. And then God can come in and re-establish His loving relationship with us in the act of forgiveness.

We're God's children, you see, and more; we're heirs to the Kingdom of Heaven. So, like all kingdom heirs, we are princesses and princes. And we're called to live like them in the world; we're God's royalty – let our lives show it.

But so often events overtake us and we forget who and whose we are. Worse, we often believe that our misconduct is actually justified. Some time ago I read a brief report in an English newspaper about Janine Brooks. Janine was a dental student when a man collided with her car and drove away. Her damaged car resulted in a considerable financial burden on her student income. The driver of the other car never contacted his insurance company, never apologized, and never paid for all the damage that was his fault.

Ten years later Janine Brooks had her own dental practice, and guess who happened to come to her practice to have a tooth extracted? He didn't recognize her, but she recognized him. She told him don't worry, it won't hurt a bit. She lied!

Or take the woman at a supermarket in central Pennsylvania who left the store only to discover a torrential downpour outside. Under a canopy where shopping carts could be unloaded, a man waited in a parked car that occupied nearly all of the space. With his car squarely in the way he watched with calm detachment as the poor woman scurried about in the rain, transferring her small children into the car and, wouldn't you know it, when she tried to lift those brown paper bags of groceries from the cart, the rain had got to them and they fell apart. And there she was, one item at a time, placing them in her car.

She finished her task, and drenched with the rain, went back to the canopy and gathered all the empty carts she could find. Calmly, she circled the man's car with them. No way could he move without going out into the deluge to clear a path. As she drove off she gave the shocked man a wave and a smile.

Oh, revenge can be so sweet! We laugh about such stories because deep down we feel that the woman really was justified, and the man got everything he deserved. So we laugh with some glee and delight.

But somewhere along the line, acts of retaliation and revenge get out of hand. In fact, they are a goodly part of what lies behind the terrorism and the armed violence that is tearing our world apart as I speak to you this morning. Somehow, somewhere, surely we have to find a way to break the cycle of hurt and revenge – and there is one sure way to do it: we need to learn to forgive.

You see, this is what the writer of Hebrews is getting at in the second reading. He draws a significant difference between the priest who stands day after day making sacrifice after sacrifice for the sins of his people, and the Christ, who sits, rested, at the right hand of God after offering Himself as the singular sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. It's an offering that makes it possible, once and forevermore, for our sins to be forgiven. All our misdeeds, all our missteps, all misjudgments, all the times we hurt someone who loved and trusted us, all the times our lives have been shoddy and disappointing, all the times we've been less than we might have been as children of God – all that has been forgiven by the one sacrifice that Christ made on our behalf.

When we realize the weight of our own sins, and that Christ has removed those sins from us, then out of gratitude and praise, we are suddenly free and able to forgive others. Every time we gather to share in Holy Communion, as we'll gather in a few minutes, we receive the wine of forgiveness. Listen carefully to the words of Jesus that we quote: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Shed for you and for all people, for the forgiveness of sin. Do this in remembrance of me."

The great joy in this meal is that we receive a tangible assurance, a sip of wine, that we can remember and find ourselves forgiven. The great sadness is that although Christ's blood was shed for all, there will be many who will refuse to receive it. It's not that our sins are excused as I reminded us earlier, but they are forgiven, and we are once again set right with God.

I have no idea what kind of hurts you may have brought with you today, and you have no idea of mine, but I do know this: Christ's death on the cross has released us all from the burden of our sins. And having been forgiven, we are asked simply to be forgiving; to live with and toward others as God in Christ lives with and toward us.

So this morning we welcomed Madelynn Alexis into our community of faith, realizing that we are all in this together as we grow together in faith, in love, and in forgiveness.

Amen.

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