

September 11, 2011 Sermon based on Matthew 18

“The Quality of Mercy”

Grace, Mercy & Peace be to you from God, our Father, and from our Lord, and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Every where you go this weekend; particularly today, you are going to be bombarded with this message, “Remember 9/11”! How can we forget that horrible, tragic day when nearly 3,000 innocent people lost their lives in the worst terrorist attack in American history? As long as you live, you will never forget where you were on that fateful morning. I know that I never will.

There are a few of us in the room that can remember December 7, 1941, that dark day when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Then again, those of us with Texas roots will always “Remember the Alamo”, right?

I am sure that many of you still remember where you were on November 22, 1963, when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas?

But, there are some positive events that we remember too; like, July 20, 1969 when Neil Armstrong stepped onto the surface of the moon, or when the Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989.

But, today, everyone’s thoughts return to 9/11; wondering to themselves, “Why did GOD ever allow this terrorist act to occur?”

In line with today’s Gospel lesson on “Forgiveness”, and as we observe this 10th Anniversary of 9/11, we must once again look at Matthew 18:35 “.... Forgive your brother from your heart”, and ask:

- 1. How would the King of the universe redeem this tragedy?**
- 2. What is God saying to our people? Our Churches? To you?**

A very long time ago a ruler of many people, a king, decided to settle accounts with all who were in his realm. As they came one by one before him, one of those who came was found to owe the astronomical sum of 10,000 talents. Now that was a lot of money, literally an imponderable amount - something like the "national debt," I suppose. Of course, the man was unable to pay.

In those days a citizen who owed more than he was able to pay could be put into prison or sold into slavery. So the king ordered this fellow sold, together with all members of his family. A terribly drastic measure, one might say. Yes, but, after all, this was a terribly large debt.

Hearing the king's edict, the stricken debtor implored the king for mercy, pleading for his freedom and another chance. The king was so moved that he granted the man's request, forgiving him the entire debt - just wiping it off the books, all of it.

Then, as this forgiven fellow was leaving the palace, he came upon a man who owed him the sum of 100 denarii. Now, 100 denarii is small change compared with 10,000 talents, not even a handful of pennies. But this debtor, who had just been forgiven so much, seized this unfortunate man by the throat, demanding that he pay the 100 denarii at once. The poor man, unable to do so, pleaded and begged for mercy. "Have patience with me," he said, "and I will pay you." But his creditor, apparently forgetting that he himself had so recently been forgiven so much, had the poor man thrown into prison until his wife and children and all his friends could scrape together enough coins to pay that small debt.

Of course, the story doesn't end here; you wouldn't want it to, would you?

Somebody went to the king with news of what had happened, and the king called this brutal monster into his presence, and said, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me to, and should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" With that burning rebuke, the king turned the ungrateful man over to the jailers, saying: Keep him until all this debt is paid. And of course the debt was never paid, because nobody can ever pay 10,000 talents.

Well, this is where the story ends, as recorded in Matthew 18:21-35.

It was Jesus who told the story nearly 2,000 years ago. And having told it, he then said, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." This story is usually called the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. And indeed it has much to say to us about the nature of forgiveness and the quality of mercy. It raises this penetrating and disturbing question: "How can we expect God to forgive us unless we forgive others?"

And we do need the forgiveness of God, you know - every one of us - sooner or later, one time or another, often perhaps, daily maybe. Right now, if I should ask all here today who have never sinned to stand, I doubt if many would do so. In fact, you and I both know that nobody would. On this matter of sin, we all know where we stand, don't we? The verdict is in: Guilty! We know, as Paul wrote in Romans 3:23 that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God ..."

So what can we do about it? Simply this: We must count on God to forgive us. There is nothing we can do that will undo the sins we have committed. This is a ledger sheet we cannot balance; even the least of our sins puts us so deeply in debt that we can never pay out. Our only hope is that the debt may be forgiven.

In all of Holy Scripture there is absolutely no evidence that God ever devised or offered any way other than forgiveness to deal with our sins. He never says to us: Do this or that and you and I will be even. Instead he says: Make yourself ready to receive my forgiveness, and I will forgive you.

See this for just a moment, if you will, in dramatic form: I have sinned, I have messed up, I'm in a jam. No good work of mine can really put things right; whatever good I do, my sin is still there, standing up at every turn to confront me, haunting me by night and by day. I am helpless to extricate myself from the pit into which I have fallen. What can I do? Well, I can repent of my sin, I can believe, and I can forgive others their offenses against me - and God can forgive my sin.

I cannot pay, but God can forgive my debt. The debt is not paid; it is canceled - and there is a difference between payment and cancellation. Payment is something the debtor does to fulfill an obligation; cancellation is a generous act of the creditor. The debt is not settled; it is remitted. The ledgers are not balanced: they are just wiped clean.

Thus, you see, the only way the problem of my sins can be resolved is by God's forgiveness of them. This being true, then I should have a passionate concern actually to receive the forgiveness which he offers. So the question is: Under what conditions may I be forgiven?

Certainly, whatever else is involved, whatever else is necessary, it is required of me that if I am to receive God's forgiveness of my sins against him, then I must forgive other people their offenses against me.

This is what Jesus is saying as he interprets for us this parable of the Unmerciful Servant. He also is saying this to us as he interprets the meaning of what we call The Lord's Prayer. This prayer, as given in Matthew 6:9-13, contains seven separate petitions; seven separate wishes are expressed in it. One of these is this: "Forgive us our debts (or) Forgive us our trespasses (or) Forgive us our sins," according to the translation one prefers. But there is in this prayer a further stipulation: "Forgive us ... AS we forgive ..."

When Jesus gave his disciples this prayer-of-prayers, he made no comment at all about it, except at this point. But in regard to this forgiveness petition he made a most drastic kind of statement. Here is what he said: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Nothing in language could ever be more plain than that.

It is clear that our forgiving others is a requirement for our being forgiven. Why? Is this some arbitrary rule that God has made? No. It is not a requirement by rule; it is a requirement by actuality. Something actually happens to us, within us, when we forgive other people, and this which happens opens us up to receive what God wants to give. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy," says Jesus. (Matthew 5:7) In other words, blessed are they who are forgiving toward others, for in being so they put themselves in line to receive the forgiveness of God.

Sometimes we talk about "Conditioning." Air conditioning is putting air in shape to live in and breathe. Water conditioning is putting water in shape to use, to drink. Psychologically, we talk about a "conditioning" of ourselves - about being conditioned to this or to that. Well, here is soul-conditioning; for our forgiving others their offenses against us is actually doing something to us, for us; it is putting us in condition, in shape, to receive God's forgiveness of our offenses against him. If we are unforgiving, God does not withhold his forgiveness of us out of some spirit of "get even," but because we have put ourselves out of condition to receive what he wants to give.

Often we talk about being "in condition" or "out of condition" physically - for good health, or work, or athletic competition, or sports activity. And, indeed, to keep ourselves in condition is important to us. Physical fitness is a great boon for wholesome living, and we are wise to do our walking or cycling or running or whatever exercise is necessary to keep ourselves physically fit.

Well, here is another kind of conditioning, a conditioning of soul, of spirit, of the inner person. And we are well advised to see to it. If we want to be in condition to receive God's forgiveness, we need the exercise of forgiving others. And, believe me, really to forgive someone who has wronged you is to put your soul through an exercise you will not soon forget.

If you have sometime really done this, you know. If you haven't, try it: you will violently exercise spiritual "muscles" you didn't even know you had! To forgive a wrong is always somewhat hard, and sometimes it is terribly so. As physical exercise can tear painfully at soft, un-toned muscles, so can the exercise of forgiving a wrong tear at the very sinews of soul and spirit. But this is how those sinews get loosened up and how they become "toned" for the forgiving touch of God.

Our forgiveness of others is an exercise of spirit which stretches and enlarges our capacities, opens up the inner spaces of our life, makes us more capable of being and feeling. To put this into the most simple of figures, God cannot bestow his forgiveness unless we have some place to put it! And to provide that place we need the soul-stretching exercise of forgiving people their offenses against us.

I have been saying that our forgiving others helps put us in condition to receive the forgiveness of God. Now, let us change the figure a wee bit, and illustrate this another way; our forgiving others opens the gates by which God's forgiveness of our sins may enter. You see, God's gifts to us come in at the same gate our gifts to others go out, and if our giving gate is closed, so is our receiving gate. In so many ways, it is only as we open up our hearts to others that our hearts are open to God. Our capability of receiving is greatly affected by the extent to which we practice giving.

If, by an unmerciful and unforgiving spirit, we have closed our hearts to others, then in some very decisive ways we have also closed them to God. And when, offering forgiveness, God comes to our door, he finds it shut. And, as you know, God never breaks down a door that is closed; he enters only the open ones.

We read in 1 John 3:17: "If anyone ... sees his brother in need, yet shuts up his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" This is a good question. How can God's love even get into him, much less abide? For the entrance gate is shut.

Nothing can be given unless it is received. It can be offered, but unless it is accepted, the transaction cannot be made. And God's forgiveness of our sins is a transaction. "Trans-action" is "action across," action by which a transfer is made. Transaction is action on both sides, action on the part of one who conveys something and action on the part of the one to whom that something is conveyed. Transaction is two hands reaching, the one to offer and the other to accept, the one to give and the other to receive. It is only as we open our hands in giving that they are open to receive.

Now let me summarize what I have been saying:

Point 1: We need forgiveness.

Point 2: We can be forgiven only as we forgive.

Point 3: Therefore we must be of a forgiving spirit, holding always in our hearts a readiness to forgive.

And now comes the main point: Since our forgiveness of others is good for us, then their offenses against us can be occasions of great blessing to us. Whenever anyone wrongs me, whenever anyone commits an offense of any kind against me, this provides an opportunity for me to deepen and enrich my soul by forgiving that person.

Sometimes people do commit offenses against others; do brutally trespass upon the peace of mind or the honor or the integrity of other persons. Sometimes folks are terribly wronged by what is done or suggested, by what is said or insinuated. And it hurts; it is painful to suffer injury. Most of us know very well the truth of this; we know it by the experience; we have at sometime felt the sting of fiery darts, the burning fury of a wrong that has been done.

But we are Christians - or we are trying to be. And in the Christian view of life, there are various ways of bringing good out of evil, of making ill fortune serve us well, of bringing victory out of defeat, of making stepping-stones from stumbling-blocks, of using barriers as ladder-rungs by which to climb, of bringing good out of a bad situation.

And, so let us suppose, here is this situation: Someone has wronged me, and it hurts; I am deeply distraught and distressed; I feel mauled and wounded, misused and put down. But the offense that rankles my soul, that sears my spirit - it is one of the finest opportunities I shall ever have; a chance to do something that will enlarge and enrich the inner qualities of my life.

So I forgive the offender, and my soul is made larger within me. As I have opened up myself to this offender, I have also made an opening for God. Thus has an occasion of deep trauma been transformed into one of glorious blessing for me.

To be merciful is one of the more noble assets of our life, a component of character with immense benefit not only for the one to whom mercy is shown, but also to the one who shows it. In "The Merchant of Venice", Shakespeare has these lines:

"The quality of mercy is not strain'd; It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath: it is twice-blessed; It blesseth him that gives and him that takes..."

And so it does. So, if you and I want the blessing of God's forgiveness of our sins, then it behooves us to cultivate the quality of mercy in every dimension of our living day by day and year by year through all of life.

Michael Green states that the key to understanding “Love for one’s Enemies” must be based on the definition of “Love”.

The word “love” is significant. The ancient world knew about philia, friendship; it knew about eros, sexual love; it knew about storage, the love that binds families together; but agape was something very different. That is why the word was practically unknown before Christ; for Agape means love which gives itself for the good of the recipient. Of course, we cannot like our enemies! But, we can love them, in this sense of agape love. We can desire and work for their highest good. We can regard them as those for whom Christ came and died and who are therefore intensely valuable to him. At least, we can begin to move in that direction if we ourselves have been magnetized by the love of God who treats us like that. And it is nothing less than that which Jesus looks for in His disciples.

In the days following 9/11, there was a genuine sense of being together. A sharing of what was truly bad became the ground for commitment to the common good. There was a sense of needing to be and work together for the good of all. Churches and Synagogues were full at each worship service following 9/11, and remained that way for months as we dealt with the tragedy.

Remember this; all the days of our lives – the best days and the worst days – are lived in God’s precious presence, because God chooses to be present and promises to be with us to the end of time. We know that we and all those who lost their lives on 9/11 mean something to God; something very precious. This Gospel holds us in common and bids us to hold one another in love and in mercy; the common good born out of a most uncommon, unfathomable grace.

Remember, Peace be with you and all the people of the earth.

Amen