

Fabric of Forgiveness

Luke 7:36-50

June 13, 2010

I.

Today's readings underscore some basics of our faith. They tell us once again of the reality of sin and necessity of forgiveness. Sometimes we are more interested in hearing about the latter than the former, but they are mostly inseparable.

Sin was obvious in the Old Testament reading from the Book of Kings. We beheld the cruelty of the notorious Jezebel, and were appalled by her devious scheme to get a vineyard at any cost. No wonder parents don't name their baby daughters Jezebel.

Then the reading from Galatians reminded us that we all are sinners whose salvation depends entirely on our faith in Jesus Christ. And today's Gospel reinforced our belief that God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ can save us from ourselves.

And today I want to focus on forgiveness, not only as it is reflected in the readings, but also in a broader sense that invites us to consider forgiveness from two perspectives. The obvious beginning is how we are forgiven for our transgressions through faith in Jesus Christ.

This aspect reminds me of the Sunday School teacher who asked her class what we had to do to be forgiven. A boy raised his hand and said, "First, we have to sin." That was a clever response, but it didn't really answer the question. That's because we already are sinners in this broken world, which I will expand upon shortly. The teacher merely recognized its ever-present reality in her question, and was not getting ahead of herself.

The second part of forgiveness is that just as we are forgiven through faith in our Lord and Savior, we also are called to forgive others. And our forgiveness must be sincere and complete.

And this calls to mind the fellow who sent a money order to the Internal Revenue Service for back taxes, along with an anonymous note that said, "I felt guilty for cheating on my taxes, and had to send this to you. If it doesn't make me feel better, I will send you the rest." That is not how we forgive. We cannot hold back in cleansing our hearts. I also will expand on that.

II.

But first, let's examine today's gospel reading in more detail. Jesus was visiting a Pharisee named Simon, and a woman who was a known sinner showed up and began weeping on Jesus' feet. She also had a jar of ointment and used it to anoint his feet. We don't know how she got into the house, but Simon, the host, did not attempt to remove her. Instead he directed his disdain toward Jesus, and thought he should know better than to allow such a thing to happen.

This story, by the way, is not the event described in Matthew, Mark, and John where a woman anointed Jesus feet and Judas Iscariot objected saying the ointment should have been sold and the money given to the poor. In those stories Jesus replied with the frequently quoted observation that "you always will have the poor with you" (Mt. 26:11, Mk. 14:7, Jn 12:8).

In today's reading, however, Jesus responded with a parable about two people in debt, one who owed a lot and the other a little. Both were forgiven their debts, and Jesus asked Simon which would be more grateful. His host said it would be the one who owed more, and Jesus agreed.

Then Jesus explained the story. He had used debt as a metaphor for sin, just as we will use the word "debts" to mean sin when we sing the Lord's Prayer later in the service. The story made the point that those who have done great sins, such as the woman at his feet, could be equally

forgiven along with those whose have sinned less. And as Jesus acknowledged the woman's faith and repentance, made evident by what she had done for him, he said that that salvation was hers.

III.

We also, through faith, can be forgiven for our transgressions. And this is a good place to pause and consider my earlier statement that we all are sinners in some way or another.

And I am not talking about robbing banks, selling drugs, or other things that all sensible people reject, whether they're Christians or not. The problems are more subtle forms of transgressions.

These are the insidious ways in which Satan, who is a real spiritual being and not just a symbol, preys upon our weaknesses, tantalizes us with plausible lies, and works to separate us from God.

Examples might be the so-called seven deadly sins. While these ungodly vices are not found in one place in the Bible under that specific name, they all are condemned throughout Scripture. They were part of the liturgy in the medieval church. The Archbishop of Canterbury used to require Anglican priests to preach about them four times each year.

These sins cover a wide range of human conduct. Traditionally, they are pride (letting our egos get the best of us, which includes vanity), envy (a false sense of entitlement), wrath (anger, abuse, and hatred), sloth (laziness in our lives or spirituality), greed (wanting more at the expense of others), gluttony (my own personal favorite, which can be indulgences, addictions, and other things that harm our bodies), and lust (which has many synonyms).

And the Bible tells us we all are susceptible to these things. Paul said in First Corinthians, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to everyone" (10:13). In Romans he said, "There is no one who [always] is righteous, not even one" (3:10-12). And in First John we are told that "if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1:8).

But if we seek forgiveness it will be granted. There is nothing that cannot be forgiven by God if we truly seek it. That means repentance and forgiveness is a continuous lifelong process. And as we deepen our faith and spirituality during our Christian journey we also broaden our success in putting our transgressions behind us. We draw closer to God and his will for us.

But even though we can transform our lives and minimize our sins, we never can eliminate them. The moment we think we have become completely holy, then the sin of pride will have overtaken us. We always need our Lord and Savior every day.

And in this respect, certainly Christ's death on the cross was a one-time sacrifice for our salvation in the next world. But it also created a reservoir of forgiveness in this world that is refreshed by our repentance, and from which we can draw as we partake of the blessings of God's grace already given in Jesus Christ.

There is a story of a woman who told her priest that she spoke with Jesus in her dreams. The priest said to her, "The next time please ask Jesus to tell you my worst sin." Shortly thereafter the woman approached the priest and told him she had encountered Jesus again and passed on the question. Then she said, "Jesus told me he had forgotten."

That is the meaning of God's forgiveness. God forgives and forgets. Only through Jesus Christ will we know God's peace now, and be able to stand in God's presence later.

IV.

And this calls us to think about the other side of the forgiveness coin. Just as our Bible teachings promise forgiveness from God, they also require us to forgive others.

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus said, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (6:14-15). And in Luke he taught, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (6:37).

It's important to recognize, however, that forgiveness can have more than one meaning. And here is the easy case. What if a family member, friend, or even someone we don't know sincerely asks forgiveness? The answer is that we are called to give it, and to accept that person in Christ's love. Jesus made this clear in Luke's Gospel when he said, "If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive (17:3)."

But what about people who hurt us and don't want forgiveness? What about those who have not asked for our forgiveness, will not ask for it, and would not accept it if it were offered? How do we forgive terrorists, and violent criminals, and those without any sense of social responsibility who do evil in the world?

And here is a more difficult quandary. How do we forgive in situations where people with whom we associate do not want forgiveness because they think they did nothing wrong, but we for good cause believe otherwise? They might even be offended if we spoke words of forgiveness to them.

Well, we still are called to forgive in all of these situations. But forgiveness now has a different meaning. God does not expect us to take passive view of terrorists, criminals, or other evil people. We are not expected to be sympathetic to wrongdoers. We do not have to tell people it's all right when they harm us. And we always are called to seek justice.

And for our acquaintances who have done us wrong and are unrepentant, we need not be false to ourselves with empty gestures of unwanted forgiveness. We still can pray for them, and we can seek and be open to reconciliation, but we are not required to allow others to walk over us.

So in these cases forgiveness takes another form. We focus not on others, but on ourselves and our relationship with God. God asks us to love him with open hearts. We cannot do that if we have hatred, anger, resentment, or malice within us, even if justified. And purging ourselves of these destructive emotions should not be seen as approval of wrongs that have been done, but rather as removal of obstacles in our relationships with God.

That is the meaning of forgiveness of people who don't want it. We cleanse our hearts from ill-will toward others even though realities of injustice or unfairness might remain. We do it to purify ourselves, not to absolve them. Un-Christian feelings in our hearts will cause static on the line and we cannot hear God. They will clog up our pipeline to him. This kind of forgiveness of others will keep our channel to God open.

V.

And so we see that forgiveness can mean different things. Through God's grace our repentance enables us to be forgiven in ways that transform us into new persons just as the woman who washed Jesus feet was forgiven and given peace.

But God's forgiveness also is something we pass on to others who truly seek it. And for those who reject it we still can pray for them and must forbear feelings of ill-will that can interfere with own relationships with God and others with whom we associate.

Then St. Paul's words to the Romans can be our guide. He said, "All things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (8:28). Forgiveness is an essential component of things working together, and it leads us to be fulfilled and enriched in our new lives in Jesus Christ. *Amen.*