

Forgiveness

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Myrick T. Cross at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, September 14, 2008.

In your mercy forgive what we have been; help us to amend what we are, and direct what we shall be. Amen. (New Zealand Prayer Book: NZPB)

Frank was a retired Naval officer in my first parish. He was an outgoing friendly sort of guy - at least on the surface. He was a leader in several different ministries in the small parish, and was a great talker, not only a talker, a lecturer. As my dad would say, "Frank knew too much for one man, and not quite enough for two. He held strong opinions about everything.

Shortly before I came to the parish, he had participated in a Cursillo weekend, which is a rather charismatic personal renewal movement in both the Catholic and Protestant denominations. The experience had the reputation of changing one's life in a "born again" sort of way. I had been invited to attend Cursillo several times and had chosen not to.

Frank felt called by God to get me to Cursillo, and he felt so strongly, his mission became the *raison d'être* of our relationship. His disappointment at my lack of interest in adopting his agenda for my spiritual life resulted in his loss of confidence in my leadership of the congregation. And then there was a sermon I preached on the liberal side of some social justice issue that pushed him over the top.

He had warned me many times that politics did not belong in the church, and his very right wing values left him no choice but to save the parish from me and visit the Bishop with a formal complaint. I don't remember how I heard about it, but it was not from the Bishop or from Frank. Our fragile relationship broke. For the remainder of my time there, we suffered an uneasy silence.

My family and I loved that parish and were loved by most of the members. When I accepted a call to another parish and was preparing to leave, I knew in my heart I had to make some kind of peace with Frank. Our strained relationship was unfinished business, and somehow I had to find the courage to confront it.

I prayed about what to do, and was given a very specific answer, "Ask Frank to forgive you for however you may have offended him."
"What?" I thought. I have not offended him; he has hurt me!

"Ask Frank to forgive you for however you may have offended him," the voice repeated clearly and simply.

I did not want to do it. I wanted to tell him how insane he had been about trying to force me to attend Cursillo, and how hurtful his running to the Bishop had been.

I had to swallow my pride and risk being hurt even more. I was afraid of how he would respond to my confrontation. But I was able to be honest about the poisonous resentment eating away in my heart, and I did not want to take it with me.

It took a lot of soul-searching and prayer before I finally visited Frank in his home. I had to let go of my pride and the control I had been holding over the situation by not trying to initiate reconciliation. The Spirit's directive humbled me and I was able to speak the truth in love.

Some sins are plain to us; some escape us, some we cannot face. (NZPB)

Prior to becoming Episcopalians, during the first year of our married life together, Amy and I lived in married student housing on the campus of Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, where I was completing my doctoral study. Another Roman Catholic couple who lived near us in the complex invited us to attend the Newman Center Folk Mass with them. We accepted their invitation, enjoyed the upbeat informal liturgy with our young contemporaries and became regular members of the congregation.

The first year of living together presented some normal interpersonal conflicts to us as newly weds. We were a little older when we were married and both of us had been active, independent, self-sufficient young professionals. I cannot speak for Amy, but married life really crimped my single, self-centered, Mustang-driving bachelor style. In almost forty years of retrospect, I confess that I did not have a clue about the conflict resolution skills needed to grow a healthy relationship. I thought it would just happen, as magically as the moment we had fallen in love.

Today's gospel reminds me just how important our faith and the church have been in supporting our marriage. Your marriages and relationships may be very different than ours, but I suspect challenges of reconciliation creep in for you too from time to time.

You must understand Amy was one of six girls, a city girl on the cusp of the women's liberation movement, and I was an innocent farm boy who had grown up with four generations living on the same farm, where life was pretty much centered around the "menfolk's" work. That first year we had serious issues to confront: When should the door be locked? How many good dress coats does one really need? Is it reasonable to throw a party every weekend? And whose responsibility is balancing the joint checking account? The stress of Amy's work teaching in an inner city kindergarten, and my quest to get my research and dissertation off the ground, challenged our patience and understanding. After the first semester, it was me, not St. Peter saying, "Lord, if my wife sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

One thing I remember about our worship experience during those days was going to Mass some Sunday mornings, carrying the heavy and debilitating baggage of a weekend's fight on my heart. At the point in the liturgy when I was invited to confess my sins, I had to face the separation I was feeling from Amy and myself. The absolution and the exchange of peace were moments of truth if I were to take my actions, attitudes, and worship

seriously. I could not go on being hurt or angry or resentful if the words were true, and if I were to make the conscious choice to accept God's unconditional love and the consequent forgiveness. Forgiveness in the liturgy changed my life, and allowed me to grow in my marriage. The litany of prayers in our Prayer Book's Marriage rite, asks, "Give them grace, when they hurt each other, to recognize and acknowledge their fault, and to seek each other's forgiveness and yours."

To experience the healing power of our liturgy in relationships is no insignificant thing. Never take it lightly. Do you realize that you hold the power of forgiveness in your hands. You can choose to stay in the prison of unforgiven sins and wallow in hurt and broken relationships, or you can choose to be free by invoking the power of forgiveness. To hold on to cancerous cells that have been caused by hurtful, destructive intentional or unintentional acts of others, is to keep the power and control over the disease and the contagion in one's own hands. As long as you wait for the offender to make the first move toward reconciliation, the cancer will spread in your heart and will zap your energy to lead a happy, healthy life. You will be a slave to sin and brokenness.

I believe it is a Christian obligation to take the first step to initiate forgiveness. In reality, the first step has already been taken. Jesus's death was the bail bond that gets us out of jail free. And it's good for life! The posture of forgiveness is that modeled by the slave in the gospel story - on our knees.

I have spoken about individual lives and relationships, and the same dynamic applies to groups, to communities, to nations. Forgiveness is the glue that can bind all colors and configurations of the human race together into the one body and one community we seek in Christ. It is the one essential tool that makes possible the harmony and unity in the City of God's Kingdom.

How will the Episcopal Church seek forgiveness from African American people for our collusion in the evil institution of slavery? Has this nation ever been forgiven for the destruction of Native life and culture? How have the unforgiven sins of our ancestors been visited on us? Can we even risk asking where the need exists for forgiveness in the wake of recently observing the tragedy of 9.11? Forgiveness implies repentance, change, and the choice to live differently.

An introduction to the Confession from the New Zealand Prayer Book states: *God has promised forgiveness to all who truly repent, turn to Christ in faith **and are themselves forgiving.*** The Confession goes on to say *We have sinned **in ignorance:** we have sinned **in weakness:** we have sinned **through our own deliberate fault.***

And the Words of Absolution:

God forgives you. Forgive others; forgive yourself. (Silence)
Through Christ, God has put away your sin. Approach your God in peace.

God the Creator brings you new life, forgives and redeems you.
Take hold of this forgiveness and live your life in the Spirit of Jesus.

Rejoice and be glad, for Christ is resurrection, reconciliation for all the human race.

Amen.