



# Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers  
From the clergy and members  
of Holy Trinity Church  
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 06 March 2005  
Title: "The Art of Forgiveness"  
Comment: Insert Comment here  
Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

## Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament 1 Samuel 16:1-13  
Epistle Ephesians 5:8-14  
Gospel John 9:1-13,28-38

---

Today's rather long Gospel reading has to do with the gift of sight. It focuses on the gift of healing given to the man at the well, and such miracles did and do occur. But there is another level of hearing this story that tells us about the inner sight that comes from being born again in Christ- that is: accepting what Jesus has done for you and letting that make a difference in your life.

In the Gospels, sight given to the blind, or light shining on those in darkness, is often used as a powerful symbol of such inward vision and renewal. Today I would like to speak about one way that we can effectively block the light of Christ, and that is through denying the miracle of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is something I always seem to mention in sermons at weddings. So many of the failed or endangered marriages I have had to deal with have resulted from one or both of the spouses being unable to forgive, or even accept forgiveness from each other. The marriage service includes this petition: "Give them grace, when they hurt each other, to recognize and acknowledge their fault, and to see each other's forgiveness and yours." And what is true about marriage is true about all other relationships in life, too.

Forgiveness is the most important way we deal with anger and it happens when the offended person goes beyond that anger. If he or she doesn't, the anger festers like an untreated wound. You can see people who cannot forgive a mile away: they almost seem to be on fire with their rage and their hurt. But Christ is the source of salvation even from ancient wrongs, and we access His power through what we might call the "art of forgiveness." That is, in fact, the title of a major work on the subject by Lewis B. Smedes.

According to this author, there are three steps in learning and practicing the art of forgiveness: first we must rediscover the humanity of the person or persons who hurt us. Secondly, we must surrender our right to get even. And third, we must revise our feelings towards the person we forgive, exchanging natural hatred for the supernatural wish for that person's welfare. If this happens even to a minute degree in our attitude, we can be sure that Holy Spirit is involved.

The author also asks the question, "Who qualifies to exercise forgiveness?" And he helpfully offers three requirements. First: we need to bear the wounds ourselves. No one else can do our forgiving for us. Secondly, we need to know that we have been wronged. Wronged is the important word. It's not the same as being hurt. It sometimes takes great maturity to see the difference and a kind of introspection that is not the same as being so oversensitive that one takes offense at even petty matters. To qualify as a forgiver, one needs to know what he or she suffered, and know that the suffering was unfair. It's not just being hurt, but being morally wronged as well.

Then there is the third point, the inner need to forgive: a reason for doing so. This is where some spiritual maturity is called for. It's not enough to tell someone, "I have to forgive you because the Bible says I should." The author of this book explains:

"We forgive when we feel a strong wish to be free from the pain that glues us to a bruised moment of the past.... We forgive when we feel God's Spirit nudging us with an impulse to pull ourselves out of the sludge of our disabling resentment. We forgive when we are ready to move toward a future unshackled from a painful past we cannot undo."

It may or may not come as a surprise to some that forgiveness, not anger, is at the center of our religion. The cross that looms so powerfully over us in this church is the ultimate sign of the ultimate forgiveness given to us by God the Father through the sacrificial death of Christ and the example it gives us of the freedom that comes from being forgiven. For many, though, this is still one of the most difficult things in their personal and spiritual life. They will say, sometimes with pain and sometimes even with a bit of self-righteous pride: "I just can't forgive." For them, it doesn't seem fair that all of the suffering they have been through should be ignored. For that reason, it is important to say what forgiveness is not:

It is not amnesia. One cannot forgive what one has forgotten. In fact, forgiveness, if it is going to mean anything, must be given in the face of complete recall of all of the pain and suffering inflicted. Sometimes we would rather forget, but it cheapens the extremely high value of true forgiveness.

It is not acquittal. It doesn't find the offender blameless or without responsibility. In fact, forgiveness is only necessary when the responsibility of the offender is recognized.

Forgiveness is not a reward: something earned or given to the most deserving. The Cross reminds us of that. Jesus didn't owe us that, treating our forgiveness as something that is due cheapens and insults the act.

Forgiveness is not approval of an action or agreement with it. It doesn't mean that the offense was okay, not that serious or something we should just ignore.

And forgiveness is not acquiescence. In other words, it is not telling the person we forgive to go and do it all over again. Forgiveness doesn't mean that the rules or commandments are gone; rather it is the first step in making the change that is necessary for the round of hurt and retribution to stop. It may not make a difference, and we have to realize that, but it is given in the hope that it will.

In the rite of Confession, or "the Reconciliation of a Penitent," that underused sacrament that so many people think is the sole possession of the Roman Catholics, the priest hearing the confession asks the penitent two questions which are connected. He says, "Will you turn again to Christ as your Lord?" In other words, "will you accept what He has done for, and still does for you, as your savior and your redeemer: the sacrifice that he made for you so that you can be forgiven?" And the second question, which is the most important condition upon which the confession rests is this: "Do you, then, forgive those who have sinned against you?" Many people don't want to hear that. They want to be forgiven but still hang onto their anger and their resentment. They wear it like a badge of holy honor. But Jesus doesn't want to hear about it. He wants to know that the lesson you've learned will be passed on to those who have offended you the way you have offended God. Like pulling out a diseased tooth, the pain seems terrible at the time, but it is necessary for the healing to begin.

This is the message from your priest on this Rose Sunday, this "Refreshment Sunday" (as it is sometimes called. It is a message of true refreshment for those who are so tired of carrying around resentment and guilt and anger that they just don't know what to do. The answer is both simple and hard: learn the art of forgiveness from the example of Christ, and enter the light of His new life.

As Paul writes in the fourth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, the 31<sup>st</sup> verse: "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."