

October 7, 2007

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Tolerating Forgiveness”

Luke 17:1-10

*And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."*

*The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."*

*"Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'? Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"*

Sermon

Intolerance of sin is something most of us don't have a problem with, right? We live in a culture that screams, "Tolerance! Tolerance!" But we know that the virtue of tolerance only goes so far. We tolerate different religions, different cultures and different political points of view, but when it comes to behavior that violates God's will, when it comes to sin, we draw a line.

Christ is pretty clear about sin in today's reading. *"Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin."*

Christ clearly condemns those who bring sin to others. We're not told exactly who the "little ones" are that Jesus speaks of, but it doesn't really matter if they are little kids, new Christians or any child of God. The fact is that the person causing others to sin would have been better off drowned.

I think both the disciples and us don't have any problem tracking with that. We think of drug dealers, pornographers, promoters of abortion, and maybe even casinos and the folks that put out some of the trash on television and we say "What scum. They purvey sin and filth and ruin peoples' lives. It would be better they be cast into the sea. It's right that God is going to one day give them what they deserve." We have no problem condemning those who bring sin and evil to others.

But Jesus doesn't leave things out there with others. He brings it into the family. He makes us look closer to home. *"Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him..."* At this point I think everybody is still tracking. We may not particularly like conflict, but if we see somebody screwing up and sinning we can see ourselves calling them on it. Picking out flaws in others comes pretty easily to us. But after encouraging us to rebuke our sinning brother Jesus continues, *"and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."*

Suddenly things have become intolerable. We and the apostles bristle at this command. Jesus says that repeated sin, a sin that is committed over and over again, and not just any old sin but a sin aimed directly against us—we are to forgive it over and over and over. Most of us are fine with the forgiving once. We all know people make mistakes. But well, "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." Right? The idea that someone could wrong us repeatedly and we're supposed to forgive them again and again just because they ask, well that's just too much to handle. We can't tolerate it.

Realizing how tough this is to do, the apostles turn to Jesus and say, *“Increase our faith!”* And the Lord said, *“If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”*

It really seems like Jesus suddenly switches gears here. One minute He is talking about repentance and forgiveness in the extreme, then suddenly He is onto the power of faith. I’m not sure if the disciples were able to catch the connection, for they had yet to see the climax of the Gospel story. I’m not sure we even catch the connection. In the face of a call to forgive the unforgivable, Christ points to how a speck of faith enables one to do astounding things. And the connection is hard to make, until you ask, “Faith in who?”

A tiny speck of faith in Jesus Christ is belief that the Son of God came to earth to forgive. Faith knows that Jesus was sinless and didn’t deserve to suffer and die, but He willingly did it anyway. A tiny bit of faith in Christ trusts that He did this so we could be forgiven. He paid for our sin so we could be washed clean through His blood. Through Christ, the stain of sin is removed—even if it has been the same sin over and over and over again.

A tiny bit a faith repents and knows that Christ Jesus wipes away our sin against Him again and again and again. How can we possibly trust in Christ’s compassion and love for us and not find the ability to show that same compassion and love to those who sin against us? Through faith in Christ, we should be able to do this. We should be able to forgive.

But the fact of the matter is that we can be intolerant. And when I say “we,” I mean we Christians, we followers of Christ, can be intolerant...intolerant of forgiveness, or should I say intolerant of forgiving. We may put on a forgiving façade, and we may even convince ourselves that we are forgiving of people...except for that one real jerk who doesn’t deserve it. You know the one; that person who keeps talking about folks behind their back, or that person who thinks he’s a cut above everybody else, or that person who flaunts her wealth, or that person who just really annoys me. We may say that we’ve forgiven them whatever offense they may have caused, but we’re keeping count and just waiting to say, “See, they did it again. They’ll never change.”

And what’s really ironic is that this often is happening among Christian brothers and sisters! Jesus probably isn’t speaking of those outside the family of believers here. I mean, why would unbelievers even be thinking of repenting? He says, *“If your brother sins...”* This forgiving is supposed to be going on among Christians! Yet look in the church. Look at yourself. Is there someone, a brother or sister in the faith against whom you hold animosity? Is there a person you regularly talk down about, or maybe you don’t even voice it, but just hold a dark cloud over them in your heart? And are you in all honesty saying to yourself, “I’m right in doing this! They deserve it! The idea of letting their offense pass is intolerable!” Often this person doesn’t even know they’ve offended us. We don’t let them know because they might apologize and then, well, we might have to forgive them, at least to their face. Why is it that we love to hang on to these grudges and hatred so much?

Lord, increase our faith! We cannot be this way. We must forgive. Not because we’re good or noble. We must forgive because we have faith in the one who forgives us. We call Him “Lord,” not because of His power and majesty and might, although he certainly possesses all that without equal. We call Him Lord because He humbled Himself to become human and then be tortured and killed by humanity to pay for all our offenses against God! We call Him Lord because His blood bought us back from Satan, death and condemnation for our sin. We call Him Lord because we are His. We who were so stained with sin God wouldn’t tolerate us in His presence are washed again and again through the Holy Spirit into a righteousness through Christ that can stand before God. We are servants of the one who saved us. As such we must forgive as He has forgiven us. We can do nothing else.

*“Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does*

*he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'*"

Forgiveness is not optional, for us or for Christ. When we repent in faith in Christ, He forgives. He doesn't do so grudgingly. Remember the parable of the lost lamb and how heaven rejoices when somebody repents. God is eager to do so!

We servants of God can do no less. It is not only our duty, it is our privilege. We've been gifted with faith that receives forgiveness and accepts the Lordship of Jesus Christ to our eternal salvation. That we are allowed to forgive in His image is a blessing.

It's not always easy. As our Gospel reading says, it is impossible that sin won't come in this life. It comes upon us and tries to convince us we are Lord and judge, passing sentence on those around us, not tolerating forgiveness. But we can pray to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" That faith points us to the true Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ who forgives us and bids us do the same to all who repent.

Look in your heart. Is it intolerant of forgiveness? Is it holding onto an offense and refusing to forgive? Look to your Lord! Look to what He did to forgive you of your many, many sins. Look to how He washes them away never to be remembered again! Have faith and forgive as He forgives you! Know that you are His forgiven servant, privileged repent again and again, privileged to be forgiven again and again, privileged to forgive one another again and again and again.