



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, *Rector*

Forgiveness: Another Word for Life

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 14, 2014
The fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 18:21-35*

In many years as a priest and in a good portion of life before I was one, I can honestly say that the struggle with forgiveness is near the top of the human miseries I have come to know in myself and in others. We desperately want to be forgiven, and I believe that beneath even the worst pain, we also genuinely desire to forgive others. And yet the obstacles to both desires are often huge and sometimes seem simply beyond our capacity to achieve. Because no one, absolutely no one, escapes this dilemma, it is incumbent upon our faith experience to address this thorny issue. Otherwise it is of little or no value.

In this regard, I believe that Jesus shines for us; at least the authentic words of Jesus do. Both the overriding arch of Jesus' recorded life and the experience we have of Christ who continues to live among us bear witness again and again to the remarkable power of forgiveness. I have never known anyone not to be touched with his famous response to the group of men about to stone an adulterous woman: "Let him without sin, cast the first stone." Just its recollection has quieted an angry heart many a time. Throughout his life and at its end from the cross, Jesus came down on the side of forgiveness even for his torturers.

And yet forgiveness does not come naturally to us; and because we see the world from the center of our selves, we have trouble believing that it comes naturally to God. That is a great sadness. It blinds us, I fear, to recognizing one, if not the, defining characteristic of God: God's choice to forgive, an imperative, really, seemingly hardwired into the reality of God and transmitted into the life of Jesus. Though we say, "Of course, God forgives," we often live as though we do not truly believe this fundamental and incredible bit of good news.

It seems too good to be true, and honestly scripture does not always make it easy or clear for us because these marvelous writers of our faith story had trouble believing it too. Today's lesson, an exaggerated story to create a poignant morality piece, concludes with the comment that we too shall be tossed into the land of torture if we do not forgive others as we have been forgiven—a New Testament version of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." These words, most scholars believe, are almost certainly the agenda of Matthew, not the authentic words of Jesus. I tend to agree; however, that does not mean they should be dismissed or ignored, for they carry critical truth for us. Listen carefully: I do not believe that the heavenly Father, as the scripture via the narrator claims, ever tortures us—regardless of what we do. Torture/God: big disconnect. But I not only believe, I **know** that the unwillingness to forgive tortures us. I have seen it in the twisted, desperate faces of many, many beloved people over the years. And I have felt it in my own heart on occasion as a pain that is almost unbearable.

One of the headlines this week has been the end of the seemingly interminable trial of Oscar Pistorius. Tragic from start to end, an unlikely Olympic hero, a gorgeous lover, and a dark reality that ruled the day—the story has captured this world. As you undoubtedly know, Pistorius was acquitted of the most serious crime, premeditated murder, but convicted of what we would call involuntary manslaughter. In an interview shortly after the verdict was handed down, Reeva Steenkamp's mother stated that the verdict was wrong, that true justice had not been served. No surprise there. But then she repeated what she has said before, that she has forgiven Mr. Pistorius. Though shocking, the pain still so raw, somehow her claim made perfect sense to me when she added, "I forgive him because I must in order to survive." Virtuous of her? Yes, of course, but I see it primarily as a way of choosing to live rather than die an agonizing and slow death of recrimination, rage and revenge.

For me, one of the greatest tragedies of capital punishment is its claim to satisfy, provide closure for, to give final comfort to the loved ones of a crime's victim. Though I am lucky never to have stood in their place and therefore fully admit I cannot begin to know what it would feel like to have one I treasure murdered, I believe the claim that execution will make it right is a terrible lie. In my years of opposition to capital punishment—earlier moments of activism, now the slow burn of resolve about something's essential wrongness—I have been a keen observer of family members who have been interviewed following the execution of the one who killed their beloved. To a one, peace is not what I have seen in their eyes.

It is complicated, as life is. This week we marked another anniversary of 9/11. I don't know how long we shall continue to have the 9/11 Memorial Service. Primarily for the first responders in our neighborhood and now beyond, invariably the service is almost overwhelmingly moving. I suppose we shall have it as long as we need to. Though the lessons we use at that occasion call us to forgiveness, there is no concurrent call to forget. As in sins of abuse, acts of terror are remembered for a purpose: to be safer, more prepared, less exposed. If indeed it were possible for us to forget, it would not in all likelihood be smart. Regardless, suggesting that one should forget such horror would appropriately be called to quick question.

And yet this too is complicated, for we pay a great price if remembrance consumes our present lives. There is a great story about Clara Barton, the founder of the Red Cross. I hope it is true; if it isn't, it should be. She was by all accounts a very forgiving person. Purportedly a friend once reminded Clara of something horribly cruel that had been done to her. When Clara looked confused, her friend said, "Don't you remember that? It was awful what he did." Clara's response was, "No, I distinctly remember forgetting that." Choosing to forget, particularly in the small resentments we so often cherish, is a great lesson to be learned. And even with regard to egregious acts of terror, living today without the constant burden of the remembrance, even as we attempt to stay safe, is not disrespectful to those who are gone.

In this brief panoply of forgiveness issues, there remain two that linger in my mind. The first has received much attention in recent years: our unwillingness to forgive ourselves. Though truly critical to our mental and spiritual health, forgiving ourselves is a slippery slope in its own right. Too casually forgiving ourselves for hurting others has appeared to me on occasion as a get-out-of-jail-free card, which in fact denies the consequences of our actions, more an act of irresponsibility than genuine self-forgiveness. There have been a few people to whom I have wanted to say, "Yes, of course, forgive yourself, just not quite yet!"

And finally there is the thorniest issue of all: Our need to forgive God, to forgive God for not being the God we have created God to be. It was innocent enough, the God of our childhood. The stories taught us about a God who was quick, ready and willing to solve anything, to deliver us from all danger. The adult God we have come to know is not like that, our hymnody to God's all-powerful ways notwithstanding. To move to the recognition of God as companion in life's joys and pains, as sustainer in triumph and defeat, as the One from whom nothing can separate us, requires that we move to adulthood; and in an odd way that crucial, life-altering move also means that we must somehow forgive the earlier God—and those who assisted in that God's creation.

In the end, forgiveness is another word for life, and it comes from the heart of God.

In the name of God: *Amen.*