



The Reverend Dr. Philip C. Linder

October 14, 2012

## ***Pentecost 20 Year B October 14, 2012***

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The late George Burns once said, “A good sermon should have a good beginning and a good ending, and they should be as close together as possible.” I will try to take his advice on this final sermon on the nature of Christian prayer.

We have spent the last two Sundays examining the nature of Christian prayer from the posture of St. Francis and the most significant prayer that he wrote. Together we have looked at: *Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; and, that I may seek to understand rather than be understood* . This morning we consider that which I believe is the most challenging; ***For it is in pardoning that we are pardoned...***

Perhaps St. Francis too found those very words challenging...words that Jesus himself challenged us with in the most significant prayer that Christ gave us, the ***Lord's Prayer—forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us***. Or in even more common English ***forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us***. So that at least every Sunday when we say these words immediately

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*Established in 1847*

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after the consecration of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, the very high point of our liturgy, the apex if you will, we ask God that God will forgive us of the sins of our lives where we hurt God and others, as we forgive those people who hurt us.

*As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?’* Although not specifically addressed here by Christ, at the core of the Christian Gospel is Jesus calling his followers to possess forgiving hearts. Forgiving hearts are key to inheriting eternal life. In fact so much so that Christ claims over and over again by word and action, that forgiveness was a clear sign that the Kingdom of God was breaking into their midst.

Who is that person, or persons that have hurt you deeply and you have not forgiven? Mark Twain once wrote that, *Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it*—a poetically powerful image. If we live long enough, we will most likely have a crushing life experience and be tested as to whether we can emit forgiveness to that person, persons, or institution. Reflect upon where you find yourself today with the place of forgiveness in your life and prayers? Who do you need to forgive?

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Throughout my life and ministry I have leaned on some rather dramatic stories of forgiveness to find strength for those people whom I needed to forgive. Do you remember in 2006 the Amish school tragedy? On Monday morning, October 2, 2006, a gunman entered a one-room Amish school in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. In front of twenty-five horrified pupils, thirty-two-year-old Charles Roberts ordered the boys and the teacher to leave. Roberts then prepared to shoot the girls with an automatic rifle and four hundred rounds of ammunition that he brought for the task. The oldest hostage, a thirteen-year-old, begged Roberts to "shoot me first and let the little ones go." Refusing her offer, he opened fire on all of them, killing five and leaving the others critically wounded. He then shot himself as police stormed the building. "I'm angry at God for taking my little daughter," he told the children before the massacre.

The story captured the attention of media in the United States and around the world. By Tuesday morning some fifty television crews had filled the small village of Nickel Mines, staying for five days until the killer and the killed were buried. But what no one saw coming was that the Amish parents brought words of forgiveness to the family of the one who had slain and wounded their children. The outside world was incredulous that such forgiveness could be offered so quickly for such a heinous crime.

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Within a week of the murders, Amish forgiveness was a central theme in more than 2400 news stories around the world. The Washington Post, The New York Times, USA Today, Newsweek, NBC Nightly News, CBS Morning News, Larry King Live, Fox News, Oprah, and dozens of other media outlets focused upon the forgiveness of the Amish. Three weeks after the shooting, "Amish forgiveness" had appeared in 2900 news stories worldwide and on 534,000 web sites.

Imagine that from the funerals where they had buried their own children, grieving Amish families accounted for half of the seventy-five people who attended the killer's burial. Roberts' widow was deeply moved by their presence as Amish families greeted her and her three children. The forgiveness went beyond talk and graveside presence: the Amish also supported a fund for the shooter's family. "All the religions teach it," said an observer, "but no one does it like the Amish." How could the Amish do this?

Sometimes when we come across such a story it stays with us for a lifetime. I don't know how many of us would be capable of such "Amish" forgiveness, and yet this is what Jesus taught us from the cross as he asked God to forgive those who crucified him. Perhaps though most of all such stories give us the strong push that we need to go over to the other side—to let go and forgive the ones who have deeply hurt us. Remarkably when we pray for this forgiveness and can genuinely

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give it, regardless of whether it is acknowledged and accepted by the ones who have hurt us, we become truly free of it for the first time. You see, without Christ's forgiveness from the cross, I do not believe that resurrection was possible.

Who this day do you need to forgive? What forgiveness do you ask for from God? *For it is in pardoning that we are pardoned...Amen.*

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