22nd Sunday after Trinity
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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 18: 32-35 Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall My heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

THE CHURCH MARCHES UNDER THE BANNER OF FORGIVENESS

One of the greatest roadblocks and hindrances in the forward march of the Christian Church is the sometimes amazing lack of forgiveness on the part of those who would claim allegiance with Christ! I say amazing, because the Church marches under the banner of forgiveness. If there is one thing that ties Christians together, causing them to work and strive together to extend the kingdom of Christ, it is forgiveness - forgiveness from God and forgiveness for one another. Yet, the work and progress of the Church is often damaged and handicapped because Christians themselves will not forgive! Personalities clash! Cliques are formed within the body of Christ! One or the other members drop out of active service within the Church, because he ~~cannot~~ will not forgive. There is often an appalling lack of attendance at worship, at voters' meetings, at ladies aid, at LWML, at Bible Class, because Christians are carrying a grudge!

Let me tell you today that the distinguishing mark of the Christian faith is forgiveness - forgiveness, whether accepted from the hand of God or extended freely by one man to another. It is the great plus of the Christian life that people can see. Though the world may be willing to give you the shirt off its back, it is not willing to forgive. Christians forgive - and there is the difference!

Christians forgive, because they have been forgiven. At the very heart of the Lord's Prayer there is this small petition: Forgive us our sins, our debts, our trespasses. It does not make any difference whether you say sins, debts, or trespasses. Sins and debts are the words used by the King James version to translate the Lord's Prayer as handed down by Matthew and Luke. Trespasses is the version of the Book of Common Prayer, based upon the earlier Bible translation of Miles Coverdale. Whichever form you use makes little difference. It does make a

difference that you pray the prayer with a full heart! It is not an easy petition to pray, and is made even harder by the following clause: Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone that is indebted to us. The world follows a different principle: Treat you friends right; you almost have to in order to save face. Treat your enemies as they treat you; you almost have to in order to save face. The pagan philosopher Cicero made the principle even more explicit: Love your friends and hate your enemies.

A Christian mother, who because of economic circumstances was forced to live with her son and his wife, was abruptly told by her daughter-in-law to leave, in spite of all her efforts to take a helpful and unobtrusive place in the family. They simply could not get along. The older woman's presence in the home was ruining the privacy of the young couple, or at least so the young wife thought. The mother-in-law left. A short time later trouble arose between husband and wife. The young woman now came and pleaded with her evicted mother-in-law, Please, try to convince Jim that he should not leave me. The son came to his mother and said, How can you be nice to her after the way she treated you! If you help her now, it will be a sign of weakness on your part. Keep a stiff upper lip, and do not try to take her part. Fortunately, this Christian woman did not follow her son's advice. She stepped in, and with mature wisdom helped to restore the harmony of the home. Only God knows how many homes have broken asunder because husband, or wife, or children have obstinately refused to forgive. The idea that forgiveness is a sign of weakness is all too prevalent today. Repay wrong with wrong is the policy of the unbeliever; never forgive, for you may be stamped a weakling.

Our Lord has something to say about this in one of His typical stories about a wealthy king who had decided to check up on some of the servants managing his affairs. In the process he came upon one man who was fantastically short in his accounts. By poor management and downright dishonesty he had lost some ten million dollars of his master's money. Even a king could not take a loss like that without feeling it. Burning with indignation, the king ordered the man and

his family to be sold into slavery, in accordance with the custom of the time, and all of his property to be auctioned off. In desperation, the servant sought an audience with the king, fell down on his knees before him and begged, Please, O King, have patience with me. Give me time and I will pay you all. The king was so touched by the servant's earnest plea that he did much more than the servant had asked for. In an amazing demonstration of mercy he forgave him the entire debt, every last penny of it.

Almost immediately thereafter, when the servant had collected himself from his fright, he remembered that a fellow servant still owed him about twenty dollars. He remembered all this, that is, when he happened to see his fellow servant coming toward him. He headed him off and grabbed him by the throat, almost strangling him. You own me twenty dollars, he shouted, the cords on his neck standing out with the force of his exertions. Pay me right away! Again we hear the same entreaty: Please, give me time and I will pay you all. The man perhaps explained that his wife had suffered a relapse, and other unexpected bills had made it impossible for him to pay the twenty dollars out of his last pay check. But the servant who had just been forgiven would not listen. He had his fellow servant, who could not pay his piddling debt, thrown into prison.

This might have been just another story of injustice, had it not been for the fact that other servants saw it all and reported the matter to the king. If the king had been angry when he discovered the embezzlement of ten million dollars of his funds, his righteous indignation now made his former wrath look mild. At once he summoned the servant. Thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me. Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee? And with that the king delivered him to the jailers until he should pay his whole debt. This is the last we hear of him, except for the fact that we are led to believe he never came out of prison again.

In telling this story, our Lord added a very important sentence: So likewise

wise shall My heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses. This story talks right to our hearts. Christ takes for granted that all of us are hopelessly indebted to God. In God's calculations each of us is an embezzler. And what is more, God takes our sins seriously. This basic fact has always been a little shocking to respectable people. It sounds like preacher talk, which they are inclined to regard as a form of exaggeration designed to scare people into being good. Pepple are perfectly willing to recognize, when they take something which does not belong to them, that they can properly be charged with stealing. Few stop to think, when they fail to worship God regularly and properly, that they are withholding from Him the honor due Him. If we live only for ourselves, we are stealing from God the service He has coming to Him. If we are hurtful and spiteful to other people, we rob God of the love we owe both to Him and to our fellowmen.

We belong to God. He expects us to live for Him every step of life's way. When we fail to live up to His expectations, His record shows a loss. We are like the man in the story who owed the king ten million dollars. We have no more ability to repay our debt than he had of working off this enormous sum. Every hour of the day finds us robbing God in some way or other - and the debt keeps on mounting all the time. There is no way to catch up.

This brings us to the final fact in Christ's story which must not be forgotten - the astounding fact that God does forgive. He forgives us, such as we are. Christ encourages us to pray: Forgive us our sins. He tells us to think of God as a generous Lord who will cancel our debt, even though it should cost Him a great deal. Christ knew what He was talking about. Through Him God worked out the price and paid it. The price Jesus paid was offered not in currency, but in His life's blood. He suffered for us, that is, He suffered what we ought to have suffered. He died for us, that is, He died the death we ought to have died. Because of Christ's suffering and death, God checks our accounts and declares them paid in full.

But Christ makes quite a point of the fact that if we really pray this prayer, Forgive us our trespasses, we must be ready to add, as we forgive those who trespass against us. God expects a change to occur in the hearts and minds of people He has forgiven. He intends that those who have been forgiven should forgive as readily as He has forgiven. Christ's injunction is altogether plain! He says, Forgive! Someone may reply, That sound good enough. But if you knew how he or she repaid my kindness, what kind of things he said to me, how mean they were to me, you would not blame me for not being ready to forgive. Perhaps I would not blame you, but God would. He forgave from the heart. He expects you to forgive from the heart.

People who claim to follow Christ cannot put limitations on their willingness to forgive. You cannot say, for example, I can forgive, but I can't forget. That popular sentiment may be quite commonplace, but it does not represent forgiveness from the heart. As the English preach Charles Spurgeon once put it: When you bury a mad dog, you don't leave his tail above ground.

The strength of the Christian Church lies in this one little word: forgiveness. The Church marches out into the battleground of a hateful and spiteful world with the message of Christ's Cross. And the message of Christ's Cross comes straight from the heart of God: I forgive and I forget! As it is with God, so it must be with God's people. We must likewise forgive and forget! God help us!

Amen.