

PENTECOST 10  
THE PRAYER JESUS TAUGHT US  
JULY 17, 2016

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1 John 1:8-2:2; Psalm 145:8-9, 17-22; Luke 11:1-4

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator, from our Savior Jesus Christ, and from the life-giving, in-dwelling Holy Spirit. AMEN

Somewhere in my studies and pastoring I learned from someone who is lost to the mists of time that the numerous Greek words we translate as “sin” may best be summed up as “division”; that “sin” is “division” or “brokenness”. While none of my scholarly books, nor any biblical study help website I can find bears out this definition, I find it to be extremely helpful and informative.

What if in this prayer we prayed, “And forgive us our divisiveness as we forgive the divisions between us”. It seems like we’d be one step closer to mutuality and reconciliation; to true forgiveness.

It seems like we’d be moving toward the renewed relationship our Narrative Lectionary Study Guide compilers foresaw when they wrote, “To forgive is not to say that what has transpired does not matter. Rather, it is to say that the wrongs that have occurred no longer define [us or our relationships]. Forgiveness or “release” means that there can be a different future... Forgiving does not mean perpetuating destructive patterns of relationship by turning a blind eye to [them] and “letting things go on” in the old way. Forgiveness or release is designed to bring change. It accomplishes its purpose when it opens up a future that the wrongdoing from the past had closed off.’

Forgiveness is release “designed to bring change”, to “open up a future that the wrongdoing”, the divisiveness, from the past had closed off.

At last Sunday’s Prayer Service for Philando Castile, ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton challenged all of us who belong to the dominant culture not only to consider our participation in a system that devalues the lives of people of color, but also to avoid moving too swiftly from grief to forgiveness and reconciliation.

And here is the tension in our final petitions of the Prayer Jesus Taught Us: Martin Luther writes in his Small Catechism commentary on this Fifth Petition, “...[W]e are worthy of nothing for which we ask, nor have we earned it. Instead, we ask that God would give us all things by grace, for we daily sin much and indeed deserve only punishment. So, on the other hand, we, too, truly want to forgive heartily and to do good gladly to those who sin against us.”

We desire forgiveness, deeply, though we know we deserve only punishment. We feel guilt and shame and we want this pain - which we brought on ourselves - to stop. But we can move too quickly to assuaging our guilt. The absence of guilt may prevent us from learning or growing or facing the evil or temptation that produced the guilt, and we may end up perpetuating destructive patterns, rather than walking into a new future.

An acquaintance of mine offers us a prime example: she has, so far as I know, never been wrong about anything, ever, in her life. I have never heard her apologize, though I have witnessed her maltreatment of both colleagues and loved ones. While she can see that she has caused pain, she is quick to justify her actions and words, and therefore feels no need to repent.

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I have seen a two-fold result in this person's inability to repent - which means to "turn around", to "change direction" - or even apologize: first, she carries around a massive load of unidentified and unresolved guilt, though I don't think she knows it. Unable to admit guilt, she can't articulate an apology, and since she generally feels she has nothing to apologize for, she receives offers of forgiveness as unnecessary or disingenuous, at best, or as an affront, at worst. Which makes it very hard for forgiveness to sink in or register. The part of her that knows her guilt, then, can't really let it go: since forgiveness doesn't fully register, it's difficult to accept it as real or sufficient. As a result, she has internalized a great deal of pain which she projects onto those around her: since she is never at fault, any problems or issues in her professional or personal life are the fault of her colleagues and loved ones, making it extremely difficult for her to cultivate healthy relationships of trust and mutual respect. And since she can't appreciate the freedom of gracious forgiveness for herself, she withholds it: she's developed both an incredible ability to make others feel terrible for the smallest (perceived) slight and an incredible ability to hold a "justified" grudge. The pain she causes defines her relationships and deepens division and without repentance there is no opportunity for a new future to emerge.

Entitlement to forgiveness - or an assumption of perfection - can lead to an abundance of guilt and a reluctance or even an inability to repent, which leads to an inability to know and experience God's release. Too-swift forgiveness can cut off the potential for a new future for all of us; our entitlement, our inability or unwillingness to look carefully at our complicity and to learn and grow as we repent means we allow the pain of the past to define our relationships into the future.

Sometimes our sin is unintentional: Paul elucidates this form of division in Romans 7:15ff, where he writes,

"<sup>15</sup>I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. <sup>19</sup>For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."

This is the type of sin in which we desire and attempt to follow God's will, but the evil within us simply turns us around and leads us off track; when we are trying to do right, but we do the very thing we most wish we would not do. I find myself falling into this sin when I am trying particularly hard to get things right:

During a visit with Brian's folks a few years ago, I offered to mow my in-law's giant lawn with their giant new rider mower. I had never used a rider mower like that before, but after a brief tutorial, I felt confident enough to give it a go.

Now, in the front yard of this country home sits the junction box, where the underground electric wires from the road meet the underground wires from the house. We all agreed that I should use special care to *not* hit the junction box, which at about four feet cubed, was easy to notice and should have been easy to avoid.

You know where this is going.

As my circles around the yard brought me closer and closer into orbit around the junction box, I had numerous conscious thoughts about *not* hitting it. "Avoid the whole area", I told myself.

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“Give the thing a really wide berth”, I said. “Nothing worse than hitting the junction box - super embarrassing and probably hugely problematic; do *not hit* the junction box...” That was the thought I was having at the very moment that my left hand, completely against the direct command of my brain, twitched inexplicably and sent me across the ten-foot swath I had attempted to leave - and drove me smack dab into the junction box.

There was an impressive series of snaps, crackles and pops; several sparks shot out. I turned off the mower, deeply mortified and shouted for Brian - hoping he could translate the calamity to his dad. (I needed an advocate to intercede for me.) I was nearly in tears, having just proven to my father-in-law that I really was hopeless at doing anything helpful, because I had just cut off all power to the house, and because I had done the one thing I was meant *not* to do.

My father-in-law, immediately forgave me and immediately I felt better. He called the power company and about a half-hour later the power was back on and all was well.

This was a case of unintended wrong-doing, a case in which instant forgiveness was extremely beneficial to me, individually, and to my relationship with my father-in-law. In this case, instant forgiveness opened up a new future for our relationship. Truly, the whole episode wound up being sort of a blessing.

But when the wrongs run deep, when hurts are ancient and generational, when injustice is systemic and institutionalized, instant forgiveness deprives us of opportunities for learning, for growth and for true repentance, for the chance to reshape our present and walk into God’s new future; to experience what we mean when we claim that “Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world”.

Divine intervention led me to watch Jimmy Fallon on the Tonight Show last Wednesday, a thing I have never done before. During a segment called, “Bad Signs”, in which viewers send in photos of signs they see in their neighborhoods or on their commutes, someone sent in this sign from their local Catholic church:

“Confession today (Saturday) will be until **exactly 5:30PM**. There is only one priest available for confession today. Make your confession direct to the point and **confess only your sins and offenses**. No need to explain why you did it. Thank you very much.” [Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon: “Bad Signs” segment, July 13, 2016]

While undoubtedly hilarious, I read in this sign both a frustration from a priest who likely has heard way too many in-depth stories of peoples’ escapades, and I read a reluctance to allow the repentant sinner to fully unload their guilt.

Yet, in order to *experience* forgiveness - and there is an important distinction: God’s forgiveness is always offered, but our ability to *experience* forgiveness, to know ourselves as forgiven, can be marred or impaired - in order to *experience* forgiveness many of us need to process our sin and for many of us doing so verbally and explicitly is extremely helpful: “better out than in”, as Shrek always says. We need to get the bad stuff out in order to feel the freedom and know the grace of God’s forgiveness, of God’s “release”.

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And while the familiar words from 1 John may help some of us feel like we have properly confessed, repeatedly using rote words may simultaneously encourage a sense of entitlement to forgiveness: we've said the prescribed words, so God's forgiveness must be forthcoming - a sentiment that flies in the face of Jesus' atoning sacrifice as the singular work that assures our forgiveness; even as the sameness of our confession stunts our ability to know and own the particular sins or trespasses for which we are seeking forgiveness, which in turn may make it incredibly difficult to really let it go and experience God's release from guilt.

Jesus tells the parable of the Prodigal Son who feels entitled to his father's riches only to squander them in a lifestyle full of shame. He finally ends up with the swine.

On his own path, the Prodigal Son was stuck wallowing with the pigs.

We can wallow in guilt. We can be trapped by our disinclination to repent and our entitled desire for easy forgiveness. And division can define our relationships into the future.

Or we can turn to our Advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous; we can believe that Christ "is the atoning sacrifice for our sins" and in this firm conviction, we can rise up and turn around, back onto the road of truth, the road that leads us home where our loving Parent greets us with feasts and rings and robes and celebration. "If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness". God will clean us up and set our relationships right. To see this forgiveness, to know absolution and feel release, to experience these gifts as ours, sometimes we have to let the pain of guilt wake us up; sometimes we need to own the hurt we have caused; sometimes we need to forego easy forgiveness and learn from our wrongs; sometimes we have to turn around, walk in a new and different way; let ourselves be changed by God's forgiveness. Sometimes we have not only to apologize, but to truly **repent** in order to experience the blessed relief and release of God's gracious forgiveness and see a new future open up.

AMEN