

In Harmony

Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; 12-09-07

Here we are on the Second Sunday of Advent; the Sunday when we light the Candle of Forgiveness. It seems that we are able to deal more easily with the other Sundays during this season. We can find a measure of hope in the darkest days and nights, we can find joy in many events in life and most of us, although not all, are able to give and receive love. But, forgiveness is a completely different story.

If we have ever been deeply wounded by another person, we find it difficult to see him or her the same way we did before the injury. We become more cautious and less able to trust. If we have been wounded deeply enough we begin to live life in a pre-emptive manner, preferring to keep up our guard and strike out before anyone can get to us. This defensive way of living is not what Jesus had in mind for us when he spoke of forgiving others not just seven times but “seven times seventy.”

Some of my friends and family members have told me that I forgive too easily and too quickly. I think I do this because I am a little simple-minded. Even as a child I didn't hold grudges or consider how I could take revenge on someone who had been mean to me. It never entered my mind to plan a counterattack. Well, maybe just once—there was this bully that was annoying a friend of mine, but that is ancient history. This was going on in fourth grade and, suffice it to say, the bully never bothered him again.

Some have told me that forgiving others is a sign of weakness and maybe it is, but I have discovered I can live no other way. And, as Ghandi reminded us: “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.”

As an adult there have been times when I have considered the delicious fun I might have in battering someone in return for a beating I had taken. But, I found it drove people crazy to have me simply forgive them and let the past dwell safely in the past, never mentioning what had happened. Carrying around a grudge or anger is just too time and energy consuming. For me, it is like stepping onto some very sticky flypaper and not being able to move forward. I do not like that trapped feeling. And, that's what happens to us when we refuse to forgive someone for a wrong; we trap ourselves in pain and unhappiness. No one else does this to us, we do it to ourselves—there can be no finger of blame pointed in any other direction.

Our refusal to forgive another most often has little to no effect on him or her. Life rolls along while the one who cannot forgive remains sitting on the sidelines rummaging through a sack of painful memories.

There have been volumes written on the subject of forgiveness. Some try to lay down specific steps in the process. Others wonder if human forgiveness is possible, some remind us that to truly forgive we must also forget. I am not sure I agree with this last thought. Sometimes the memory of the hurt may linger even though we have let the other person off the hook of our judgment. I do know that if we want to find a way to live in harmony with others, being able to forgive is a major ingredient in our lives. Are there some things we cannot forgive? Yes, for some of us there are terrible things that

have happened to us or to someone we love. In these instances, we need to leave the forgiveness in the hands of God, who forgives us all.

John the Baptist came reminding people of God's forgiveness. Repentance and forgiveness were essential factors in his message. He was a rather wild man living out there in the wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey, a proper low-fat-high protein diet. He sounds as if he did not have much finesse in trying to get his message across. He came preparing the way, somewhat like a bulldozer, for the one who would follow, showing us a new way of living toward hope and peace and love and understanding.

Jesus came to shine a light into the recesses of our souls, to awaken us to all that is good and true and lovely. We have our good moments, certainly, and we have our bad. The good news Jesus brought us was that we are full of possibility. We can be like him. We can reflect the light of God to others as he did. We simply have to choose to do so.

I have a friend who once told me that he thought I could change his stance on a particular issue. I wanted to and I still would like to. . However, I reminded him that if he felt I had changed him, it would not mean much. All change we need or want to make must come from within, in response to a sense that we must do or view things differently. I cannot change you and you, unfortunately, cannot change me. The power of transformation is ours alone with God's help. This is true in all areas of life, but especially in deciding to develop a forgiving spirit.

Jesus knew this. That is why when people came to him for healing he might ask them if they wanted to be well. If they did they were to "take up their beds and walk." They were not just to sit or lie in one place and expect something to happen to them. They were responsible for their lives and the manner in which they chose to live them.

We are, too. If we ever hope to see the lions lie down with the lambs with a little child leading them, we will have to find a way to live together in some sort of peaceful harmony. We will have to lay our contentious thoughts and feelings aside, our thoughts and feelings that pit us one against another, and find a new way of living and moving and having our being. This is as true of individuals as it is of nations. We need to look at the basis of our faith and try to discover what it was and is that made Jesus our model. What is it that we believe we must nurture and cherish so that our faith goes on beyond us?

Last week we took a brief look at hope, this week we have considered the problem of forgiveness. If there is anyone, including yourself, who needs your forgiveness, this is the perfect time to reach out and attempt a reconciliation. It is the season when we await newness of life. To sense the presence of Jesus entering our souls we need to prepare the way as we leave painful memories behind and move forward to embrace the future.

Amen