

July 28, 2013

Hosea 1:2-10

Psalm 85

Colossians 2:6-19

LUKE 11:1-13

“THERE IS NO FUTURE WITHOUT FORGIVENESS”

How many people here today have a “record”? No hands, please.

I’m not talking about the kind of record played on a stereo.

Oh, *that* kind of a record.

Now, I’m not proposing to do public background checks on the whole congregation, just to remind us that from the perspective of the Letter to the Colossians -- and of Jesus in telling us what we need to pray for -- we *all* have “records.” You, me and everyone else.

I mean “records” of offenses in the *spiritual* sense. Have each of us *always* loved God with all our hearts, all our souls, all our minds and all our strength, and loved our neighbors -- all 7 billion ones, and that’s just the human ones -- as ourselves?

Didn’t think so.

Me neither.

So, we all have “rap sheets”, “records” if you will, of all those many times even the best of us fell short. We don’t have 613 commandments defining our duties in precise detail, many of which the ultra-meticulous and devout could indeed check off; we have two BIG, cosmic-sized commandments. And if we ever kid ourselves into thinking that we actually obey *them*, there’s the one which comes just from Jesus, not just from his quoting the Hebrew scriptures. Ready? Jesus said, “Love one another as I have loved you.” Yeah, I don’t come close to obeying that one, either. That level of self-sacrificial love is way beyond me.

C.S. Lewis said that the attitude of many of the authors of psalms is that of a plaintiff in civil court: “Give me justice, O Lord, for the wicked oppress me.” Lewis

added that the attitude of the faithful in the *New Testament* is that of a defendant in criminal court, one who knows he or she is guilty and if justice is done, they're "cooked:" "And Peter went out and wept bitterly."

It is so much easier on our consciences to think about the times we've "colored between the lines" and done the expected, ethical things and been noble and generous, instead of thinking about the other times, never mind the "things undone that I ought to have done." Oh, right, those sins count too.

Only when we think about this does the power of today's Epistle come to us: God "forgave us our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross." [I point to the crucifix.] That's where all of our "records", our "rap sheets" have gone. Thank God. Otherwise, if not for the grace of God, where would we be?

And this isn't just Paul's "thing" or that of his followers. When one of Jesus' disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray," the prayer Jesus taught -- in Luke's pithy, less liturgical version in today's Gospel -- includes as its longest sentence a focus on **sins**. "Forgive us our sins." That means we all have some -- including the apostles, rank does not set anyone above sinning -- and if we think we don't, we're kidding ourselves.

And then comes the even tougher part of the package: "for we forgive everyone indebted to us." Oh sure, of course we do. Really? And suppose -- as Matthew's phrasing of this prayer, which we use today, indicates -- we will *get* as much forgiveness and we *give*? Uh oh.

Let's be clear, forgiving someone does not mean that someone did *not* do something *wrong* to us. If we hadn't been done wrong, we wouldn't *need* to forgive them. Mistakes are different. Forgiveness also doesn't mean "It was nothing." If it really *was* nothing, we wouldn't need to forgive. And the expectation by God that we forgive is not just for those people who sincerely see the error of their ways and beg for our forgiveness. Those situations are important and sometimes also are hard -- but there are other situations in which people have wronged us who have *no intention* of asking for forgiveness.

When we are asked to forgive in the spiritual sense, we also at the same time *can* press charges legally, particularly if to do so means protecting ourselves and others. For example, it is often very hard for a woman who has been abused to bring herself to press charges against her abuser, but it is necessary because abuse is wrong and dangerous --

abuse against her and anyone else the abuser might target if allowed to go unchecked. At some point when that person is put away and she and the community are safer for a while there can come a time when the process of forgiveness in the spiritual sense can begin, but Christians' spiritual duty to forgive should *never* be lifted up as a commandment to be a victim. Jesus wants all to be safe.

Unforgiveness can eat people up inside and warp them without in any way punishing the person who has done wrong. Forgiveness can be hard, so in some circumstances -- and I've had a few myself -- it's like the old saying about "How do you eat an elephant?" "One bite at a time." If there's someone you have a really hard time forgiving, first pick one minor offense against you and forgive the person for that, meaning *vowing not to retaliate personally* for the wrong done to you. Then go from there.

Forgiveness involves a letting go, a deciding not only not to concoct some elaborate revenge on a person, but also not to brood on the offense she or he committed against you. Again I can speak from personal experience that forgiving someone in your heart can be liberating, replacing the toxic experience of holding a grudge with *letting go* of the heavy toxic sludge -- er, grudge -- and being washed clean and able to walk without lugging around the self-imposed weight of unforgiveness.

It's important to note that we can actually forgive someone in our hearts without actually communicating with them. Direct communication sometimes is appropriate and even cathartic, but sometimes makes a situation more complicated. In any case, sometimes people have a spiritual need to forgive people they cannot communicate with, either because they do not know where they are and how to reach them, or because the other person refuses to receive one's communications, or because the person or people we want to forgive are dead.

Do it anyway. It's good medicine. And in any case, God is listening and encouraging us every step of the way. And God can pass on messages.

I hope to come before Jesus some day, and when I do perhaps he'll shake my hand and say how much good it did when I forgave people, and perhaps I'll see a pile of my forgivenesses -- maybe the size of a mound of leaves one might rake up in October. And perhaps then Jesus will say, "Let me show you what I have forgiven you." I expect to be ashamed to the huge size of the pile, and deeply grateful for Jesus' amazing grace for me, and for all of us.

When we realize Jesus' forgiveness for us, our souls are filled with light and life, and an eagerness to go out and spread both the light and the life. We can ask for guidance from God about how to do your forgiving: maybe just in your heart -- and maybe by communicating with someone. God knows the condition of the other person, who just might have been too ashamed to reach out to you with an apology.

Miracles sometimes happen. In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission invited perpetrators of atrocities committed during apartheid to come forward during a limited time frame and tell the truth about what they did, what had happened to people who disappeared, and even where the bodies were secretly buried, in return for amnesty from prosecution. Apologies were not required, but amazingly some were given. Even more remarkably, some people received forgiveness from surviving family members.

I think this extraordinary process and the Christian spiritual commitment of so many people in general, were why, miraculously, South Africa did not have the bloodbath after the fall of the white supremacist regime which was widely predicted.

The Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, has said, "There can be no future without forgiveness." That is why Jesus told us to ask God for forgiveness -- and to forgive others. If we want a future.

The Rev. Dr. Francis A. Hubbard
Christ Episcopal Church
New Brunswick, New Jersey