

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

September 4, 2022 – PENTECOST 13 / PROPER 18, YR. C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Sermon: “*Why Forgive?*”*

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| Deuteronomy 30:15-20 | (The Lord urges the people to choose life and obey Him) |
| Psalms 1 | (Happy are those who delight in God’s law) |
| Philemon 1-21 | (St. Paul urges Philemon to take back Onesimus) |
| St. Luke 14:25-33 | (Jesus teaches we must give up everything to follow Him) |

In May 1981, an attempt was made on the life of Pope John Paul II. Thanks be to God, the Holy Father lived. After his recovery, the Pope visited the man who had tried to assassinate him. Deep inside Rome’s Rebbibia Prison, the jeans-clad terrorist and the white-robed Pontiff huddled in a dark cell for twenty minutes, speaking in voices so low, no one else could hear. But the Pope could be seen clasping Mehmet Ali Agca’s hand as they parted. When he emerged, John Paul explained, “I spoke to him as a brother whom I have pardoned, and who has my complete trust.” Headlining this astonishing gesture of reconciliation, the January 9, 1984 cover of TIME Magazine¹ was emblazoned with the words, “Why Forgive?”²

A good question, one that has concerned Christians for centuries. Peter asked Jesus about this in Matthew 18:21-22, where our Lord instructs him to forgive seventy times seven—if you’re doing the math, that’s 490 times.

However, to most of us, forgiveness does not come easily or naturally. United Methodist Bishop William Willimon observes: “The human animal is not supposed to be good at forgiveness. Forgiveness is not some innate ... human emotion. Vengeance, retribution, violence, these are natural human qualities. It is natural for the human animal to defend itself, to snarl and crouch into a defensive position when attacked, to howl when wronged, to bite back when bitten. Forgiveness is not natural.”³

And yet, forgiveness may well be the most important thing we ever do. For, in Matthew 6:15 (CEV), our Lord teaches quite bluntly: “If you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.” *Ouch!* This is a hard saying of Jesus.

Because forgiveness is so crucial—not only in our relations with others, but to our relationship with God—perhaps that is why Saint Paul’s letter to Philemon is included in the canon of Holy Scripture. The shortest book in the Bible, it’s often overlooked by church folk and scholars alike. So I believe the Holy Spirit is asking us to take a closer look at its message this morning.

Writing from a Roman prison, Paul penned this short letter probably at the same time as Colossians, and sent it to Philemon, the pastor of a house church, possibly in Colossae, Greece. We read in Colossians 4:9 & 16 that two travelers, Onesimus and Tychius, will be carrying this letter.

And sure enough, the document is about a runaway slave called Onesimus—whose name means “useful.”⁴ Philemon, although a Christian, was, along with many others at that time in history, a slave owner. Apparently, his slave Onesimus had stolen money from him and run away to Rome, where he had become acquainted with—and converted by—the Apostle. Now Paul is sending Onesimus back to his master, but with a letter asking Philemon to forgive Onesimus and treat him as a brother in Christ.

Saint Paul himself models the grace and mercy he is requesting, by stating that although he has the authority in the Church to order Philemon to forgive, Paul would rather appeal to his friend to do this for Jesus’ sake.

That is because, “If we hold a grudge against someone, the door to God will be closed,” wrote J. Heinrich Arnold, a leader of the pacifist Bruderhof movement. “It will be absolutely closed, with no way to him. Only if we forgive others will we be forgiven. I am sure that many prayers are not heard because the person praying has a grudge against someone, even if he is not aware of it.

Jesus says more than once that before we pray we must forgive. If we want Jesus, we must have a forgiving heart.”⁵ But what is forgiveness? Let’s begin with what forgiveness is not.

- First, it does not mean forgetting: Deep hurts can rarely be erased from our awareness. A good example of this would be the Holocaust. No one could, or should, *ever forget* such a horror.
- Second, it’s not about reconciliation: Reconciliation involves two persons. However, the injured party can go ahead and forgive the offender without reconciliation coming about.

For instance, we have the freedom to forgive a deceased or estranged loved one, whether or not we ever see them again or are capable of resuming that relationship.

- Third, it doesn’t mean condoning the other’s offense: Forgiveness cannot excuse hurtful behavior. For example, if a drunk driver kills your child, even if you forgive him, you can’t condone drunk driving.
- Fourth, it does not come about by dismissing: To forgive means taking the offense seriously, not passing it off as inconsequential or insignificant.
- And last but not least, it does not involve pardoning: A pardon is a legal transaction, such as having to pay a penalty, which releases an offender from the consequences of his or her actions. Only a judge—or God—can pardon. Forgiveness is a personal transaction in which the offended releases the offender. Or, as one commentator wrote, “it is my choice to release my hands from around the other person’s neck.”

In a more spiritual vein, renowned pastor Dr. Charles Stanley teaches that forgiveness is not a *feeling* or an *emotion*. It is a decision you make with your *will*. It is a choice to release the other person from the debt you think they owe you.⁶ That debt can be anything from actual financial debt—we’re talking money—to an emotional or relational debt, which more commonly need forgiving.

For example, if I know someone who is irrational and mean, and I begin to despise that individual, I need to release that person from my notion that they *owe me* reasonable and kind behavior. This requires humble self-examination, because so many of our daily resentments are fueled by expectations that other people owe us something—whether it is efficiency from a sales clerk; caution and respect from fellow drivers on the road; model behavior in our kids; more romance from our spouse; encouragement from our teacher or boss; or more personal attention from our pastor. Whenever others incur some sort of emotional, behavioral, or personal debt to us, God is calling us to release them from that debt, to choose to believe the other person no longer owes us what we were expecting or demanding.

That notion of forgiveness as debt-release works with ourselves, too. We can become angry and bitter toward ourselves rather than others, if we think we’ve failed to fulfill *our own* expectations. It also works when we are angry with God, when we think *He* has not fulfilled our expectations.

Currently, the Daily Office readings are concentrating on the Book of Job, in which the much-beleaguered Job has every reason to, as his unkind wife advises, “curse God and die.” Yet, Job does not believe God owes him a perfect life. In his faithful humility, Job essentially releases God from the debt that Job’s wife and friends think God owes him.

At times, we find ourselves having to forgive others, ourselves, and God, all in one day, because life can be very upsetting. “Anger,” writes Max Lucado, “is a peculiar yet predictable emotion.” It begins as a drop of water. An irritant. A frustration. Nothing big, just an aggravation. Someone steals your parking place. Someone pulls in front of you too closely, on the highway.

A waitress is slow and you're in a hurry. The toast burns. Drops of water. Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip. seemingly innocent drops of anger, and “before long you've got a bucket full of rage. Walking revenge. Blind bitterness. Unharnessed hatred. We trust no one and bare our teeth at anyone who gets near. We become walking time bombs that, given just the right tension and fear, could explode.”⁷

Why forgive? Because unforgiveness is no way to live. If today you are having difficulty forgiving someone—or yourself, or God—ask the Lord to help you release that person from the debt you feel they owe you. Although it may take some time, you'll be surprised how much better you'll feel.

The New Testament doesn't tell us what happened when Onesimus went back to his master Philemon. However, about 50 years after St. Paul wrote this letter, Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch, was being taken to Rome to suffer martyrdom there. From Smyrna, St. Ignatius wrote a letter to the Ephesian Church, in the opening chapters of which he has much to say about their *Bishop* Onesimus. Although we cannot be sure that Onesimus, Bishop of Ephesus around 107 to 117, was the same young man whom Paul sent back to Philemon, it's not impossible that he was, and that he lived to become a Christian leader. After all, in the canon of saints, he is now “Saint Onesimus.”

One Bible commentator notes that if Onesimus “did indeed rise to be the bishop of Ephesus, his was very probably the hand that preserved ... these two letters [that is, Colossians and Philemon] and carried them to Ephesus, there to become the nucleus of [the collection of Paul's letters].”⁸

If all this is true, it is a wonderful illustration of the power of forgiveness to release another person to be all that God intends them to be—even if that person is yourself. Moreover, as devotional author Gary Inrig writes, “The best reason for forgiving is not that we will live longer or feel better ... The best reason for forgiving or for seeking forgiveness is that, in this way, we will glorify God and reveal his character to those around us.”⁹

Or, perhaps the Bible puts it best, in Ephesians 4:2: “be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.” *Amen to that!*

* Adapt. N. George Hacker, 5 September 2010, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

¹ Lance Morrow, Barry Kalb, Wilton Wynn, “John Paul II: I Spoke ... As A Brother,” *Time Magazine*, 9 January 1984.

² Adapt. Randall H. Perry, “Who Me? Forgive Who?” eSermons.com via <illustrations@clergy.net> 11 September 2002.

³ William Willimon, eSermons.com via <illustrations@clergy.net> 11 September 2002.

⁴ NIV Text Note (Philemon, v. 10).

⁵ Peter Mommsen, *Homage to a Broken Man: The Life of J. Heinrich Arnold – A true story of faith, forgiveness, sacrifice, and community*, (Plough Publishing, 2015).

⁶ Charles Stanley, *Put the Past Behind You and Give The Gift of Forgiveness* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991).

⁷ Adapt. Max Lucado, *No Wonder They Call Him Savior*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988).

⁸ Adapt. Edgar J. Goodspeed, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1937).

⁹ Gary Inrig, *Forgiveness: Discover the Power and Reality of Authentic Christian Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 2005).