

## **Sermon for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost**

*Proper 18, Year A  
September 7, 2008*

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A little boy desperately wanted a bicycle, and prayed every night for God to give him one. After months of this he asked his Sunday school teacher about why God wasn't answering his prayers, and she said, "Oh, God doesn't work that way."

"So," he asked, "what does God do?"

"Well, God forgives us when we sin."

That night the boy prayed again, but this time he prayed, "God, thank you for forgiving me for stealing Kenny's bicycle."

One of the best pathways to open up feelings of guilt is to talk about forgiveness. Bringing up the idea of forgiveness reminds nearly all of us that there are people in our lives we have not fully forgiven. And when forgiveness is one of the primary commandments of Jesus, a commandment we remember every time we speak the Lord's prayer, the idea of forgiveness can easily become a trigger for guilt.

It's ironic isn't it, that forgiveness can make us feel guilty? That really is funny.

In my former parish I suffered several years of harrassment and real animosity from this one fellow. He was gifted and talented and outwardly charming. But he was clearly my enemy. I tried every approach possible — I bent over backwards with kindness. I tried shifting to meet his demands of me. I stood firm and challenged his inappropriate behavior. In response he sent accusing letters to the bishop. He was a trouble maker in meetings. He insulted me publically, just as he insulted about everyone else on the vestry and staff. He was a professional PR person, so he was very good at doing this. And because he was charming and often kind, he also got elected to the Vestry.

He sat straight across from me in every meeting. If looks could kill, I wouldn't be your Rector. We figured out how to work around him, and we kept getting work done in spite of the negative energy he brought. Finally we approved a major strategic plan, and this man made a very careful speech about how we had abandoned the call of Christ. With that he resigned from the Vestry and the church and walked out.

It was about the best Vestry meeting I've ever been part of. The next morning when a Vestry member called to say that he'd been in touch with our disgruntled friend suggesting he should rethink his resignation, I nearly hollered, NO! I can't tell you how relieved I was to learn that no reconsideration was underway.

We had basically followed this morning's gospel pattern with this man. I approached him alone. The wardens and I approached him and pointed out

how unreasonable and destructive he was. The whole Vestry confronted him. We did not have the nerve, or the canonical authority, to take that last step and cast him from the church. But the relief I felt when he left was so wonderful. As I tell this story I know, and perhaps you can suspect, that I have not reached that point of forgiving and forgetting. I don't think about him, except to come up with a sermon illustration. I don't wish him any harm or ill. But I do still dread him a bit. I'd hate to have him show up here.

Forgiveness means we call everything square and even. Often forgiveness can set us free from the emotional bonds that tie us to the past. Our best definitions of forgiveness have to do with debt. If I owe you money, and you tell me I no longer need to worry about it, that's forgiveness. Now if I really could have paid you back with a little bit of discipline and sacrifice on my part, then I may feel indebted to you. I may feel guilty about your generosity. But if I'm in such a hole there's no way I could ever pay you back, and you set me free from that overwhelming life long burden, I will feel nothing but relief. I will feel like you've given me back my life.

There's a lot of people in this country right now who feel like their debt has become an overwhelming burden, a life long burden of impossible obligation. People are losing their homes. People are losing their health care. People are losing their neighborhoods. They don't need discipline. They need forgiveness.

I love watching Extreme Makeover, where a team of designers comes to a family in financial hardship, living in a run down home. They send the family off to Disneyland while they completely rebuild the house in one week. Hundreds of volunteers help out, and by week's end the leaking, falling-down house has been replaced with a dream home. I've seen dozens of episodes and I still get teary eyed and choked up when the family comes home. And usually, the final act of the drama is that the homebuilder or banker shows up with the deed and declares that home has been paid for, and all the debt has been wiped away.

That's a family that understands forgiveness. Pay attention to the joy and relief they show, and then put yourself in their place. Perhaps it is your spiritual home that's leaking and falling off its foundations. Perhaps it is a relationship with a loved one where the plumbing's broken and a rainy day backs up the sewer. Perhaps your extreme makeover has to do with some kind of guilt that makes your spiritual home way too small for all the troubled children you're trying to live with.

When Jesus promises that our debt will be forgiven, what we have to trust is that he is already carrying out an extreme makeover in us that will be every bit as extravagant and generous as the ones we see on TV. It's not just that this relationship can be quieted down, but that it will be turned to love and affection. It's not just that spiritual weakness will be coped with, but that spiritual unity with God's own being is the outcome. God means to bring you and me to perfection, not just to good enough.

Where we find joy and peace in this life is through focussing our attention and energy on living in that hope. Forgiving your enemy is not

another burden laid on your shoulders. Forgiving your enemy is the work Christ is doing in partnership with you. Focus on your partnership with Christ. Focus on being in tune with Christ. Forgiveness will come as a side benefit. Forgiveness will be one of the stories you tell, not of your own personal accomplishment but of the gift which Christ gave to you. Focus on Christ and your love for him, and you will become a spiritual giant. Focus on Christ, and you will know that in the resurrection all will be made well.

As for my nemesis I told you about, I don't think I'd be all that much better at working with him today than I was ten years ago. What I do know, though, is that in Christ our relationship will be healed. In Christ I know that when I get told that this man is to be my roommate in heaven, God will have healed me enough that I'll be thrilled.