

Forgiveness Sunday

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Today we stand at the threshold of Great Lent. We have journeyed together starting from the week after Theophany when the Gospel text was Jesus's 40 day fast in the wilderness and the overcoming of the primary temptations that plague man: love of this world, pride, and vain glory. Jesus called us then to repent for the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. We have continued to hear about repentance in the following weeks. It started with the remarkable metanoia that led to the complete conversion of Zaccheaus, the chief publican. The next week we saw the contrast of true and false repentance in the publican and Pharisee; followed by (probably the best loved parable) the repentance of the Prodigal son, the loving embrace of his father, and the unresolved hard-heartedness of his older brother. Last week we reflected on the importance and necessity of supporting one another, in whatever way we can, as all of us are part of the body of Christ, called into communion and care for each other. One of today's theme, however is more frightening—the expulsion of Adam & Eve from Paradise. The stichera sung at last night's service were certainly a sober spiritual reminder for all of us. We heard of Adam weeping outside the gates of Paradise saying, "Woe is me...I transgressed one commandment of the Master, and now I am deprived of every blessing!" Also, during the matins canon we heard the words, "O miserable soul, thou hast departed far from God through thy carelessness; thou hast been deprived of the delight of Paradise and parted from the angels; thou hast been led down into corruption. How art thou fallen!" Not only are these words frightening, but more importantly, they are true not only for Adam but for us as well. By our

transgressions and carelessness, we have alienated ourselves from God and the unity and closeness which we once enjoyed has been ruptured. We no longer enjoy waking with God as our close companion in the Garden of Paradise in the coolness of the evening. Nevertheless, God has not abandoned us and our Lord and His Holy Church, in mercy and love, give us comfort. Although we have this frightfully serious theme of Adam's fall and in turn, our own sinfulness, there is another, more consoling theme as well, and that is the theme of FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is something that, at least on one level, we always hope is bestowed upon ourselves when we have done wrong. It is also something that we theoretically recognize as a worthwhile virtue and a good thing to do. But too often we find forgiveness is one of the most difficult things to actually accomplish in our daily lives. We struggle with attempting to forgive; wondering if by forgiving we are not simply colluding with evil and allowing it to continue in its way; or maybe we recognize that our shallow forgiveness is simply pretending the evils did not really occur or did not matter, which leads to plain indifference. Genuine forgiveness is the reunification and reestablishment of communion between God and us, and our neighbor and ourselves which were lost when our self-concerns created the rupture of unity and oneness which left individualism and isolation in its wake.

The Lord reminds us in this passage, "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses" So, recognizing its importance, how do we learn and actually accomplish forgiving others and accepting forgiveness? The Lord gives us one of the keys to being able to forgive in the very last statement of

this Gospel. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. I will tell you a story now as an illustration of this axiom and how it relates to forgiveness. Many of you have probably heard about a particular method of capturing a monkey but I believe that it fits so clearly here that it is worth telling again. Although I have never done this personally, I did attempt to verify that this is actually a method still used in Africa today. A person wishing to capture a monkey makes a box of whatever material is readily available as long as they can make a small hole just big enough for the monkey to get its hand into the box as well as see and smell what is inside. Now inside the box is placed a banana or some other tasty fruit. The monkey is eventually drawn down from the tree to get this tasty morsel. It is easy enough for the monkey to get its hand in through the hole to reach the fruit but once the monkey makes a fist to hold the fruit and attempt to pull both his hand and the fruit out, the hole is not big enough for both. So the monkey's hand is stuck!! Yet, the monkey insistently holds on to the fruit. Freedom is right there if only the monkey were to let go of the fruit; but it does not and continues to struggle attempting to get the fruit and his hand out of the hole. It is important to remember that the monkey's whole body is not stuck in the cage, only its fist, only one small part of them. Yet that one small part, because it is unwilling to let go, basically holds the rest of the monkey and its life hostage. The hunter simply strolls up to the trap and throws a net over the monkey to seal its fate. We clearly see in this example where the treasure of the monkey is and where it leads. His treasure is the fruit and it is worth more than his freedom. It is obvious that in this vein we need to seriously consider and ask ourselves, where is my treasure? Is our treasure really to have a deep, no barrier, always-want-to-be-with relationship with God and each other? Or are there other

sometimes, more important, things like status, recognition, possessions, pleasure, safety, etc.? Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

I remember many years ago hearing a talk at a retreat where the priest was explaining that the martyrs, who willingly gave their lives, were not doing so out of some idealistic or noble goal but were so caught up, attached, in love, and full of the Holy Spirit that they were willing to do anything as long as it did not separate them from Him. That unity, connection, and communion was more important to them than the pain they would endure, the mockery and abuse that would be heaped upon them, seeing loved ones in the same situation, and even physical death when all they had to do was simply deny Christ with their lips and sacrifice some food to an idol. Further, the priest explained, this same unquenchable yearning and experience of God is at the heart of every true monastic calling. I remember this so clearly because it was the first time that I had an inner inkling about why someone would joyfully be a martyr, how and why someone could truly forgive, and also what the goal of purification, illumination, and deification actually looked like. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

So during these next 40 days, it would behoove each of us to ask ourselves honestly "where is my treasure"? It would be nice if life were so simple or black and white that we could answer this question easily and with complete clarity. But for most of us we find that that we are rather conflicted; there is not unity and single pointedness in our being, and our heart often pulls us in opposite directions. Fortunately we have the mercy of Christ and the healing benefits of His Church and before us Great Lent. And the doorway into Great Lent starts this evening with the

service of mutual forgiveness. I know that it is not easy to come back to Church again after so recently going home, starting to relax, having that last pleasant cheese and egg meal. But this is a service you do not want to miss. Some of the most familiar prayers and tones of Lent are begun at this service and during the time of our asking forgiveness, the choir quietly sings in the background many of the beautiful hymns of Pascha as a reminder of the real goal of our Lenten struggle. We start the journey together, we will cross the desert together, and, God willing, we will reach the promised-land together. And it all starts and ends with forgiveness – our open, embracing relationships with each other and God.

We have so many wonderful examples of forgiveness to hold before us. And as we all know following examples is oftentimes the best means of learning and acquiring understanding. Of course our pattern is our Lord Jesus Christ who, in His love for us, willing became incarnate, lived among us, always gave of Himself freely and completely; none-the-less was mocked, beaten, and crucified as a common criminal out of envy. Yet with His dying words Christ asked that His tormentors be forgiven for 'they know not what they do'. You may remember the story Fr. Philip read from Richard Wurmbrand's book, Tortured for Christ, about Archimandrite Gerasim Iscu, who on his dying bed forgave his fellow communist prisoner who had tortured him to the point of death. The communist prisoner was afraid to die because the the terrible things he had committed, but Fr. Iscu forgave and excused the torturer saying that he was young and did not know what he was doing. If you do not remember this story, I encourage you to refer back to Fr. Philip's sermon that was e-mailed out to everyone on Jan. 2nd. It is worth re-reading. Or maybe some of the moving stories of forgiveness from the life of another

contemporary witness, Fr. George Calciu. Christ and all of His holy followers are examples of those who recognize that evils exist and has been perpetuated but are committed to breaking that chain of evil – by forgiving.

In closing I would like to read an excerpt from a book with another remarkable story of forgiveness that may be easier for to consider the possibility of achieving when the examples of our Lord and these giant, saintly men seem so unattainable. It is part of the life of Corrie Ten Boom who was native of Holland, and her sister Betsie, who were both held as prisoners of war in a Nazi concentration camp, and Corrie lived to recount it. This is from the book, I'm still learning to forgive

“It was in a church in Munich that I saw him—a balding, heavysset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear. It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

“It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander’s mind, I liked to think that that’s where forgiven sins were thrown. ‘When we confess our sins,’ I said, ‘God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. ...’

“The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room.

“And that’s when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with

a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights; the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor; the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

[Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbruck concentration camp where we were sent.]

"Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: 'A fine message, Fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!'

"And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

"But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

" 'You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,' he was saying, 'I was a guard there.' No, he did not remember me.

" 'But since that time,' he went on, 'I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein,' again the hand came out—'will you forgive me?'

"And I stood there—I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven—and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

“It could not have been many seconds that he stood there—hand held out—but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

“For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. ‘If you do not forgive men their trespasses,’ Jesus says, ‘neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.’

“I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

“And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. ‘... Help!’ I prayed silently. ‘I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.’

“And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“ ‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’

“For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely, as I did then”

Let us be attentive to these witnesses of God's forgiveness. Let us be mindful that although we cannot change our heart directly we can exercise our will and make the effort to reach out the hand of forgiveness to those around us. So, let us make the effort to be here tonight to give and accept each other's and God's forgiveness. Let us take this time of Great Lent to let go of the treasures of this world which so easily occupy us, attend the services as much as possible, focus on things of the Spirit; all in order to allow our hearts to be purified so that, with God's help and mercy, the treasures which we hold so dear might be transformed and replaced. Then when Pascha comes we will be able to look each other deeply in the eye, know, and proclaim together that 'Christ is Risen'!!