

FORGIVE ME A SINNER!
Homily for February 18th. 2018

This Sunday – this Sunday before Great Lent “Cheesefare Sunday”, we are offered the final, and doubtless the most essential provision for the strenuous Lenten journey that lies ahead.

We are offered the divine gift of forgiveness.

What will we do with this gift? Our Gospel reading for this Sunday tells us clearly that in fact, there are only two possible choices.

* We can EMBRACE IT. We can follow Christ on His divine path of healing and reconciliation. We can volitionally choose to forgive others freely as we ourselves have been forgiven, no matter the cost. Or:

* We can REJECT IT. We can carry our bitter thoughts and memories into the shadowlands of a withered existence in this life, and a Christ-less eternity in the next, if that is truly our choice. We are allowed to remember every wrongdoing, to cling to every bitter memory, to replay in our minds every unpleasant conversation, every unkind deed. We can fold our arms over our chests and

harden ourselves against those who have faulted us – whether in reality or imagination – those who have wounded our pride, angered us, failed to live up to our personal expectations.

And we are sternly warned by our Lord Himself that eternity stretches out before us, awaiting our decision. **“The Lord said to His disciples: If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you. If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”**

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO FORGIVE?

In the Scriptures, the word forgiveness is used in a variety of ways. Literally, it means “to send forth, send away – **to let go**. In its most literal sense it means to “**HURL AWAY**” or to **CAST A SPEAR** (KTL+). From there it moves to “releasing, as of a prisoner”, or “letting go, as of a debt” (Trench). In regards to forgiveness of sins, it signifies **the remission of the punishment due to sinful conduct**, the deliverance of the sinner from the penalty divinely, and therefore righteously, imposed; secondly, it

involves the complete removal of the cause of offense.”
(Vine – adapted.)

“To forgive – to have mercy - is to acquit the other of the guilt which by his own efforts he cannot wipe away, to release him from the debts he himself cannot pay, to make him whole from the sickness for which he cannot unaided find any cure.” (Ware)

“To forgive means to restore a bond of love and communion when there has been a rupture. Sin ruptures our relationship with God and others, as also do offenses taken and given among people.” Paffhausen.

In his podcast for Forgiveness Sunday, the late Father Thomas Hopko states that “The word ‘Forgiveness’ used here is in the past tense. “Forgive us what we have already forgiven others.” “So theoretically if we have not already forgiven others, we cannot ask God’s forgiveness—we should not dare to do so.” (Not exact quote.)

“[This tense] implies that the act of forgiveness of others is completed *before we approach* the throne of grace.” Alford)

And not only do these words come directly from the mouth of our Lord Himself, they come as His own commentary to the prayer He had just taught to His disciples, the same prayer we ourselves pray multiple times throughout the day, and hundreds of times every year. “Our Father who art in Heaven . . . forgive us our trespasses **as we forgive those who trespass against us.**” Imagine! The Savior is providing His own commentary on what those words mean. How often do we allow them to trip lightly out of our mouths, thinking more about the food we are about to eat, or the day we want to get on with once our morning prayers are finished?

“Who. ME?”

This evening, we, along with countless other Orthodox Christians throughout the world will be participating in Forgiveness Vespers – the service that truly inaugurates Great Lent. At the end of this service comes the sacramental “rite of forgiveness”, in which everyone at church – starting with the priest, who needs it most of all – asks forgiveness of all who are present – and through them, to the whole world. After venerating the icon of Christ, we

bow to each other, with contrite hearts, uttering the life altering words: “Forgive Me a Sinner”.

This is a powerful moment. I have literally witnessed lives being changed through this action.

There is always a colorful montage of sinners coming together on this night, asking each other for forgiveness. Sometimes this montage is almost comical. Some times it is heartbreaking. No matter what, it is always deeply moving.

Little children come up to us, asking for forgiveness. We ask – how could this innocent little child have sinned against me? How could I have offended him or her?

Total strangers come seeking forgiveness. We had that happen a few years ago when a pious Orthodox man was here on business, and asked to join us for Forgiveness Vespers. We had never met him prior to that evening. It was tempting to say to him – “May God forgive us both . . . and by the way . . . who are you?”

Why do we ask forgiveness from a stranger, or from a little child who we have not sinned against us in any way known to us? Isn't this stretching things a bit?

Father Hopko says: “The deeper truth, as the Russian writer Dostoyevsky said and shows in several of his novels, is that we are **ALL** guilty in front of everyone and everything. . . . The smallest, most hidden, secret impurity, rebellion, and sin, in the most secret depth of our soul, pollutes the entire universe. Because we are members of one another, we belong with one another. There is no such thing as isolated individuals; that is simply a falsehood. When we think that, “I can live in my little world, what I do does not affect anybody else,” that is simply not true. As it says in Scripture, the sin of the parent is visited upon the fourth generation of his children.

[This] does not mean that God is holding the sins of the parents against their kids, in fact that is explicitly denied in Holy Scripture, but it does mean that if I sin, and if I do evil, that evil has a life of its own, and then it takes over, and then it pollutes other people, and then it becomes part of their pollution, and then they spread that corruption, and then we have the mess of humanity that we have right now, which is called in the Scripture ‘the sin of the world.’

So there is no such thing as a private act. There is no such thing as an act between, . . . consenting adults done in private. Everything affects everyone and everything. And the smallest little evil is a sin against absolutely every human being.

And that is why we believe in Christ we must fall down on our face before every person and beg their forgiveness. In fact, according to the services and the saints and the Scriptures, we have to bow down before the birds, before trees, before the earth, because we have sinned against all the plants and the animals. We have to ask forgiveness of the air and of the water, because we have corrupted and polluted all things by our evils. We are guilty before everyone and responsible for everyone, and we must acknowledge that; we must feel that in our gut, in the depth of our heart, and weep tears of repentance for what we have done, and also therefore to show that we are penitent, to forgive what all the others have done” (Podcast - Forgiveness Sunday II).

A Russian Orthodox Priest – Father Michael Oleksa – has spent most of his life ministering and living in Alaska

among the native Americans, and has a great respect for them. He tells a fascinating story about “eskimo” (not accurate) attitudes towards animals that are taken in a hunt. It is very enlightening.

Whenever native Alaskans set out to hunt seals or other animals, they do so with the greatest respect and appreciation. There is a reason for this. Their early folk traditions tell them that when the animals first saw human beings coming into their land, they were afraid, not OF them, but FOR them. The animals wondered how these funny looking, furless creatures would possibly survive in the harsh Alaskan climate. So the animals decided that they would sacrifice themselves for these poor beings, offering up their own bodies for food and clothing. That is why when an animal is killed in the hunt, the Alaskan natives pray and offer thanks to the creature for its voluntary self immolation. They have well established traditions for how the carcass is to be treated, ensuring that no part of the animal would be wasted or treated with dishonor.

These natives have learned a lesson that we need to hear. Nothing comes without a price. Our actions, even

needful ones, have a direct impact upon family, friends, coworkers, and ultimately upon the world around us. And our sins, even those done “in secret”, leave a spiritual footprint upon this planet. “For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.” The creation groans and labors, my brothers and sisters, under the weight of OUR own sins!

“FORGIVE ME A SINNER!”

Another category of people kneeling before us on Forgiveness Sunday, consists of those who are closer to home: Friends and companions, husbands and wives, parents and children, fellow worshippers. This is a different category than the first one. In this case, we probably don’t need to work too hard to think how we have sinned against each other and why we need to seek forgiveness. The very act of being together – living under the same roof, worshipping in the same church, sharing the same tedious hours, days and weeks throughout the year brings with us inevitable struggle and friction. What family, what church, what office place doesn’t face this unavoidable reality?

There is a useful “Self Examination for the Sacrament of Confession” which is available to Orthodox Christians. It goes through each of the Ten Commandments, helping us prepare for our confession by probing the beneath the surface realities behind those familiar commandments.

Under the Sixth Commandment, “THOU SHALT NOT KILL” this guide asks a series of questions which, if considered carefully, should give us plenty of material to add to our list as we prepare for confession. Here are a few of those questions: “Have I given way to anger, or harmed others with words or actions? Have I defamed others who needed help, or failed to stand up for those unjustly treated? Have I been cruel to anyone? Have I neglected someone poor or sick? Have I given drink to the thirsty, taken in a stranger, clothed the naked, visited the sick and those in jail? Have I led someone astray from the proper path committing spiritual murder? Have I failed to forgive anyone or harbored evil thoughts against them? Have I harbored malice and resentment towards others?”

Convicting, isn't it? Our Lord said “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder,^[a] and

whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’²² But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause^[b] shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.²³ Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

This is where the rubber really meets the road. This one is not hypothetical but genetical. These constant irritations that arise between all of us are serious, and need to be addressed. The petty distractions. The harsh words and unkind thoughts – spoken or unspoken. The emails sent out to everyone EXCEPT the person being criticized. The ill will harbored against brother or sister for things that may have occurred months or years ago – things they may not remember or even know of. The private conversations that somehow went from “informational” to “deformational.” The multitude of sins we ALL commit against each other,

and which pile up like soiled laundry in the laundry basket, desperately needing our attention.

Where do we start? What do we say? How can I keep from making this worse, from reopening the wound? Wouldn't it be better to say nothing at all rather than to run the risk? Thank God, we only need to speak one line to each other tonight: "Forgive me, a sinner". What power there is in those four words. We say no more because nothing more needs to be said Nothing more CAN be said. No details, no caveats, no explanations, no dragging up the past. Tonight, only four words matter, if they truly come up from the depths of our heart. And with them, miracles happen.

If on the other hand, we can listen to those questions from the preparation for confession, and nonchalantly check the "none of the above" box, we have either reached a state of "Pure Prayer" unknown to but a few, or we are in delusion.

Here is my own guide. If I were coming before the Judgment Seat of Christ this very day, this very moment, would I still be thinking about petty issues between myself

and my brothers and sisters? And if I am coming to receive the Eucharist this morning, am I truly free from malice and ill will towards anyone in this church, or at home? Is there anything there that would – or should – cause me to turn back and seek reconciliation before receiving the Divine Gifts?

If any of those questions give us pause to think . . . and it should! there are four words we can start working on right now. We will be saying them to each other tonight at Forgiveness Vespers. And we will be saying them to God at the Great Judgment Seat.

Forgive me a sinner!

“Forgiveness means more [than saying I am sorry. It means saying] to a person: **let us no longer make the past into a destructive present**, let me trust you, make an act of faith in you, if I forgive you it means in my eyes you are not lost, in my eyes there is a future of beauty and truth in you.” Metropolitan Anthony Bloom

The Hard Cases

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You will know that you have completely freed yourself from this rot [the remembrance of wrongs], not when you have prayed for the person who has offended you, nor when you exchange presents with him, nor when you invite him to your table, but only when, hearing that he has fallen into spiritual or bodily misfortune, you suffer and weep for him as yourself. (Climacus Step 9 The Remembrance of Wrongs).

In his short story; *The Chief Mourner of Marne*, C.K. Chesterton tells the fictionalized tale of a tortured man who in the eyes of his friends, had unfairly been punished for taking part in a duel, a “fair fight” in which his opponent was killed. By the end of the story, however, they discover that the man they were feeling sorry for was *not* innocent at all, but, in fact, guilty of shameless, cowardly, premeditated murder. Upon discovering this, his former supporters turn on him viciously, condemning the now deeply repentant man to the worst of punishments.

Let me read you an excerpt from this remarkable passage:

“There is a limit to human charity,” said Lady Outram, trembling all over. “There is,” said Father Brown dryly; “and that is the real difference between human charity and Christian charity. . . . it seems to me that you only pardon the sins that you don’t really think sinful. You only forgive criminals when they commit what you don’t regard as crimes . . . You forgive because there isn’t anything to be forgiven. . . . We alone are left to deliver them from despair when your human charity deserts them. Go on your own primrose path pardoning all your favorite vices and being generous to your fashionable crimes; and leave us in the darkness, vampires of the night, to console those who really need consolation; who do things really indefensible, things that neither the world nor they themselves can defend; and none but a priest will pardon. Leave us with the men who commit the mean and revolting and real crimes; mean as St. Peter when the cock crew, and yet the dawn came.”

Does that passage resonate with you? It certainly does with me. Although I first encountered it years ago, it still comes to mind as if I had just read it yesterday.

What should our response be when the sins committed against us are REAL SINS? What should we do when forgiveness means more than “pardoning all [our] favorite vices, and being generous to “our” fashionable crimes”?

In other words, what do we do in the “HARD CASES?”

It is very important that we draw a distinction here. There is a difference between forgiving someone from the heart, and allowing ourselves to be manipulated by a sinner – even a repentant one. We are not called to be prey to those who wish to exploit our Christian charity turning it into an opportunity for further control and manipulation. God forbid.

I always love the line in the rite of confession, where the priest declares that: “I humble and a sinner have not power on earth to forgive sins, but God alone”. That is not what the priesthood is about. Every time I ask absolution for a penitent, I am extremely aware that my role is to be a conduit – a streambed, never a stream. Saint John Chrysostom reminds priests that the only thing they do in

hearing confession is to lend God their ears (to hear), and their hands (to bless).

From an eternal perspective, priests have no power of ourselves to forgive anyone of anything.

And neither do you.

So why do we ask forgiveness for someone who has hurt us deeply – harmed us in ways that cannot be healed, with “Offenses that carry their own consequences” (*A Christmas Carol*) – fabric torn beyond possible hope of repair in this life? Even if we can bring ourselves to ask forgiveness for that person, what does that forgiveness accomplish since “No man can forgive sins but God” (The story of the Paralytic).

Father Alexander Schmemmann answered this question beautifully many years ago when he said: **“To forgive is to put between me and my "enemy" the radiant forgiveness of God Himself. To forgive is to reject the hopeless "dead-ends" of human relations and to refer them to Christ. Forgiveness is truly a ‘breakthrough’ of the Kingdom into this sinful and fallen world.”** Schmemmann.

I love those words. Only God can forgive sin. No Christian in their right mind would contradict that. But through our own forgiveness, we can still make a difference. We can allow the “radiant forgiveness of God Himself” to shine through us **unfiltered**. We cannot pardon anyone of their sins – that is between them and God. But at the very least, we must find it within ourselves to step aside so that God’s grace can reach the fallen. And with God’s help, we can do more than simply stand out of the way of His radiant Light. Very often, God desires to shine that radiant not AROUND us, but THROUGH us!

“Nothing so likens you to God, as to forgive him who has injured you.” Saint John Chrysostom.

“Joy, radiant joy, streams from the face of him who gives and kindles joy in the heart of him who receives. (Saint Seraphim of Sarov).

Can we truly forgive someone who has offended us deeply – unimaginably? Irreparably? We have countless examples in Church history of saints who were able to do that very thing – to imitate our Lord’s own agonized words

from the cross when He forgave those who were crucifying Him!”

St. Seraphim was beaten nearly to death by thieves, but refused to accuse them when they were caught.

The Venerable Doulas the Passion-Bearer of Egypt, was falsely condemned by his brothers of a crime he didn't commit. When they refused to believe him, he said no more than “Forgive Me a Sinner” until much later, the real criminal confessed and he was completely exonerated.

Or consider the life of Saint Elizabeth the Grand Duchess. *“On February 4, 1905, with a climate of revolution gripping the city, Grand Duke Sergei was assassinated when a bomb was hurled into his carriage. Elizabeth hastened to the place of the tragedy and knelt by the mutilated body of her husband and embraced it. On the day of the funeral, she arranged that free meals be served to the poor of Moscow. Three days later, Elizabeth secretly visited the imprisoned murderer of her husband. She offered forgiveness on her husband's behalf, begging him to repent of his sin and to seek a pardon. The man, however, regarded his act as a virtuous deed. Elizabeth left*

a Bible and an icon in his cell. Czar Nicholas rejected her plea for mercy. Eventually the man was hanged. Elizabeth had a large crucifix erected over the place of her husband's death, with the text, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

I don't believe I would have had the strength to do that. And I don't think I am alone.

CONCLUSION

We are now entering the season of repentance, my brothers and sisters. This is a season of grace, and it begins with a heart of forgiveness – a willingness to LET GO. St. Paul stated in the epistle reading this morning, "And do this, knowing the time that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness and let us put on the armor of light."

Perhaps that forgiveness can take no other form but the resolve to hold fast to that which is right, no matter the cost, to pray fervently, and to refuse to be a part in making things even worse. Love does not seek out its own -

there may well be no visible fruit in our lifetime - we may never see a return upon our prayerful investment. Yet we must be content to keep on praying and to keep on believing even if this must be the case.

Perhaps, by God's grace, our prayers may prove to be Light bearing vehicles of grace for others. The Apostle James writes: "Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins." And the apostle Jude says, "And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh."

And even if our prayers and our love come back to us empty, our time will not be misspent. For as our Lord so clearly states to us all this morning, "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. And He further tells us: Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves

treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

My brothers and sisters. I beg you from the depths of my heart. “FORGIVE ME A SINNER!”