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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Epiphany 7, Series C  
Saturday, February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019  
Sunday, February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019

**Sermon: Forgiveness**  
**Text: Luke 6:27-38**

Focus: Our heavenly Father is merciful.

Function: That they would forgive one another as God in Christ Jesus forgave them.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: “We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins, or deny our prayer because of them. We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that He would give them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us” (SC, 5<sup>th</sup> Petition of the Lord’s Prayer).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. I’d like to open today with an extended quotation from an essay titled “On Forgiveness” by C.S. Lewis:

“We say a great many things in church... without thinking of what we are saying. For instance, we say in the Creed, ‘I believe in the forgiveness of sins.’ I had been saying it for several years before I asked myself *why* it was in the Creed. At first sight it seems hardly worth putting in. ‘If one is a Christian,’ I thought, ‘of course one believes in the forgiveness of sins. It goes without saying.’ But the people who compiled the Creed apparently thought that this was a part of our belief which we needed to be reminded of very time we went to church. And I have begun to see that, as far as I am concerned, they were right” (emphasis added).<sup>1</sup>

Dear friends in Christ, do *you* believe in the forgiveness of sins? Without hesitation, can you affirm that you bear no one any malice and harbor no grudges in your heart, that there is not a single person whom you avoid when they walk into the room?

I wish that I could say without reservation, “Yes, I absolutely believe in the forgiveness of sins.” After all, I am the pastor of a Christian congregation. I boldly declare Christ’s

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, “On Forgiveness,” in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses*, Kindle ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 178.

absolution at the beginning of each divine service. I preach the Gospel, or the Good News of God's forgiveness, every Sunday. You might almost say that forgiveness is the very tool of my trade! Having been reconciled to God in Christ Jesus, we are now ambassadors of reconciliation to the rest of the world, God making his appeal through us (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18-20).

But today I come before you not only as your pastor, or even as your brother in Christ, but as a fellow *sinner* who struggles to live out the teachings of Christ. I have many enemies to forgive. I grew up as a victim of childhood abuse. Supposed friends have slandered and gossiped about me. People have stolen from me and damaged my property. Someone in my family even cheated me and my sister out of our mother's estate.

And I have struggled to love and forgive these enemies as Christ commands. I have chewed on the root of bitterness and plotted revenge and cursed them and tried to sabotage their reputations by making sure other people know just how wicked and evil they truly are. I have wished (and sometimes prayed) that they suffer sudden or terrible deaths. I have even asked God to kill them before they have a chance to repent so that they can go to hell with all their sins on their heads. Yes, some of my favorite Bible passages are the imprecatory Psalms, in which King David (and others) pray for God to destroy their enemies.

The sins against you don't have to be so dramatic as murder and adultery in order for you to have a hard time forgiving. Sometimes the persistent irritation that never goes away and keeps bugging you is the hardest to forgive—"the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son," especially when these offenses are flung in our faces again and again.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis, "On Forgiveness," 183.

As fallen sinners, we often joke, “Don’t get mad. Get even!” And, as the old Klingon proverb goes, “Revenge is a dish best served cold” (*Star Trek*).

But that is not the way of Christ! In today’s Gospel lesson from the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus teaches us, “Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:37b, ESV).<sup>3</sup> That is a positive way to say it. Jesus puts it rather more crassly after the Lord’s Prayer: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you *do not forgive* others their trespasses, *neither will your Father forgive your trespasses!*” (Matt. 6:14-15). Yikes! Forgive, and you’ll be forgiven; refuse to forgive, and you yourself will be damned and found wanting. There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

“But what if they *don’t* apologize?” we quickly counter. “Why must I forgive them if they’re not even sorry?”

Did God wait for you to apologize before he sent his Son to die on the cross for your sins? No! The Bible says that while we were yet sinners—indeed, while we were *enemies* of God!—“Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8, 10). Jesus didn’t wait for us to apologize or make amends before he forgave us. He didn’t wait for us to get our act together. He willingly and lovingly went to the cross to die for the sins of the whole world, including the faults and failures of wretched sinners like us.

Forgiveness is not the same as excusing sin, as Lewis points out. In fact, forgiveness is more like the *opposite* of excusing wrongdoing.

“Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it. That, and only that, is forgiveness, and that we can always have from God if we ask for it.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis, 181-82.

When Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery (John 8), he didn't pretend that she had done nothing wrong. Nor did he brush it off and say, "That's okay, we're all sinners! We all make mistakes." NO! He looked her square in the eye and said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more" (John 8:11). Jesus called her sin for what it was. But he also extended mercy and grace to her. God takes sin very seriously—*so* seriously, in fact, that it cost him the life of his Son! And so we should take sin seriously too. This is one reason why I teach my family not to say "It's okay" when somebody apologizes to you. No, it's not. Sin is *never* okay. Sin is destructive and damning, unless it is repented, confessed, and forgiven. Sin is deadly dangerous, which is why it needs to get out in the open and gotten rid of. So instead, the next time somebody tells you, "I'm sorry," answer them, "I *forgive* you."

"But *how*," we wonder, "do we even make a beginning of forgiving our enemies?" What does that look like in practical terms? To which Jesus replies, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). Only by the grace of God can we carry out his command to forgive. And I mean that quite literally: only by the *grace* of God! God forgives our sins, and he alone changes our hearts to be able to forgive others. No, it isn't easy, and sometimes the softening of a hardened heart may seem like trying to remove a mountain by chipping away at it with a pickaxe. But God is patient towards you (2 Pet. 3:9; cf. Ex. 34:6). As Jesus declares, "Your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

Jesus does not say that we have to become best friends with our enemies. Many of the people I've learned to forgive will *not* get a Christmas card from me; nor will I invite them out for lunch ever again. Jesus doesn't say that we must *forget* either—only God can do that (Jer. 31:34). Jesus says that we must *forgive* them, that is, we will no longer hold their sin against them or wish them any ill will. Thankfully, forgiveness is not a feeling, but an action word! So

Jesus teaches simple steps to overturn the offense and make a break for grace: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27). In other words, do better by them than they’ve done by you. Speak better of those who speak ill of you. Pray for the very people who abuse and persecute you (cp. Matt. 5:44). Lift them up to the Lord, and let *him* sort them out. Ask him to change your heart so that you can “let go, let God,” as they say.

And I can think of no better prayer than the one Jesus prayed from the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Father, forgive my enemies and teach me to love them. Help me to see that I am just as wretched and lost and in need of mercy as they are. Help me to be merciful, Lord, for you have shown mercy to me! Father, forgive them. And Father, forgive me too. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ~~the~~ the Holy Spirit. Amen.