

**St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector

Scripture: Mark 11:25-26

***"Forgiveness"***

A couple that had been married for 15 years began having more than the usual disagreements. They wanted to try to make their marriage work and agreed on an idea that the wife had. For one month they planned to drop a slip in a "Fault" box. The boxes would provide a place to let the other know about daily irritations they were experiencing. The wife was quite diligent in her efforts and approach: Her entries were "leaving the jelly top off the jar," "wet towels on the shower floor," "dirty socks not in hamper," on and on until the end of the month. After dinner, at the end of the month, they exchanged boxes. The husband opened his box and thought about what he had done wrong. Then the wife opened her box and began reading. All of the entries were all the same. The message on each slip was "I love you!" Do you know someone like this – who keeps score of everything that you do; the good, the bad, and the ugly? I think we all can relate to the one who keeps score – but we should all be more like the one who wrote I love you – who kept no accounts – but instead simply covered them with his love. Forgiveness is a two way street!

There are quite a few people today who have this image that God is writing down everything that we do – keeping score of the good, the bad, and the ugly, and that one day we will get all of this shoved back in our faces – sort of like the "fault box." Some of us may even have grown up being taught that we need to work off our faults, our sins, and our transgressions, if you will – so that we could escape punishment when we die. It is for this reason so many people are afraid to die, absolutely terrified –to meet Almighty God, face to face. They think God will "let 'em have it" with both barrels! You know the truth is that God is taking into account how we live our lives – but not necessarily to punish us. One only has to pray the Lord's Prayer to get a glimpse of the character and heart of Almighty God – "*forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" Forgiveness is a two way street.

Jesus walked the earth as a human being – and knows our frailties first hand – and He gave us those words to pray – in spite of our faults and weaknesses. I know from personal experience how hard it is to try to admit you are wrong when you have blown it - letting so much get in the way, like pride, or trying to fulfill the expectations of others. It is hard in the midst of daily life to stop and remember Jesus' words taken from the Gospel of Mark which can help us get back on track. It is hard – but it is how we must live! "*Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.*" (Mark 11:25-26) Forgiveness is a two way street.

Country singing star Garth Brooks has a song which says "We buried the hatchet, but left the handle sticking out." One great obstacle of stumbling is non-forgiveness. The hatchet might seem to be buried, but people continue to grab hold of the handle when they want to use it against another. Jesus said if a brother repents, forgive him—that is, bury the hatchet *and* its handle. How many times, you might ask? As often as the brother repents, we are to forgive. Don't grab hold of buried hatchet handles, for they become stumbling blocks to forgiveness.

One of the hardest things in this life is to admit you are wrong – and in doing so that you are not perfect. Going to a brother or sister and admitting that you may have hurt them is something that we do not easily do. Can you remember the old TV show "Happy Days?" Arthur Fonzarelli – better known as the Fonz just could not bring himself to say it. One episode shows

him practicing in a mirror trying to say the word "Wrong" but he just can't do it. If I am not mistaken he never did admit he was wrong. How like the Fonz we are. They say that confession is good for the soul, but boy is it difficult to do when we're embarrassed or ashamed about what we've done – but we all do it, don't we? (Oh – by the way – there is nothing that we have said or done that God has not seen already – yes – even the things we are not proud of! The good news is that He offers us forgiveness; there's hope; and there is the blessing of a clear conscience and freedom when we confess – when we repent in the name of Jesus Christ. The Apostle John speaks of this forgiveness and the importance of being in relationship with Jesus: *"If we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* (1John 1:7-9)

My brothers and sisters – we need to understand something. This is not about stuff that we do, or things that we can do to try to get things off the list – and work things off, or purgatory or whatever you might want to call it. You either have a debt or you don't. If you know Jesus Christ and you have repented of your sins - if you were to meet God Almighty today – and stand before Him – you would be told one thing - Your debt is paid! It would be HIS righteousness that would be judged and not YOURS. God is not standing here and taking notes and saying “gotcha.” He wants to say when we repent – “you are forgiven!” We are not to be afraid of God – we are to respect Him, to revere Him, and to love Him.

God has made provision – right from the very beginning - after the first sins of mankind – to forgive those who truly repent of their sins. God promised that He would provide a Savior – and that wonderful promise was fulfilled when the Angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in Matthew 1:21 explaining what was happening to his betrothed, Mary, saying *"She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."* I am curious to know how many people here today know what the name Jesus really means? Jesus – or Yeshua is the Hebrew word for “salvation!” Every time salvation is promised or mentioned in the Old Testament – it refers to Jesus and God's promise of forgiveness of sins. Salvation comes by God's grace through Jesus – Yeshua. Moses saw the truth of redemption is God Himself in Exodus 34:5-7: *"The LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the LORD. Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations."*

God is all about forgiveness – not keeping score - and He sent His Son – Jesus, Yeshua - as the one to bring about that forgiveness. Once again the Apostle John clarifies God's intention for those who repent: *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* (1John 1:9) All we need to remember are our Lord's own words as He was hanging on the cross – His compassion was real and He said: *"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."* (Luke 23:34) They whipped Him, they beat Him, they spit on Him - but He said “forgive them.” His example of how to forgive should be our model. Thanks be to God – we don't get the bill.

However in the middle of seeking and granting forgiveness there is an important issue that many people are dealing with - and that is their "self image." So many people agonize asking: "How could God possibly want to forgive ME?" "Why would God want to even bother with ME?" Mankind was created uniquely in the image of God – and we cannot and must not lose sight of that fact. He cares about even the hairs on our heads – and that, believe it or not is difficult for some to fathom. The Psalmist asks this question: "*When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained; What is man that You take thought of him, And the son of man that You care for him?*" (Psalm 8:3-4) We are a speck of dust on the map of the universe – but each one of us specks of dust are important to Him.

You might have trouble accepting this – because of events and circumstances in your life that have made it difficult for you to feel loved , wanted – but God considers YOU highly valuable! To Him you are precious! Jesus asked His disciples in Luke 12: "*Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.*" There is no reason to fear God – that is how much He loves you!

**Our only true value is God's estimate of our worth, not anyone else's!** Other people look and evaluate how we perform, what we achieve, and how we look. But God cares for US, He cares for our hearts – He values life as precious. He cares for all of his creatures, because we belong to Him, HE LOVES US and we can face life and face Him without fear. Each one of us plays a specific role in His plan. Hear these words of St. Paul's from his letter to the Romans: "*Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.*" (Romans 12:1-8)

**Our self-esteem is affected by how closely we identify with Christ.** Do you know Him? Healthy self-esteem is important because some of us think too little of ourselves. What do you see when you look in the mirror? Do you see an image of someone made in the image of God? Or do you see someone you don't like? On the other hand, you may look and fall in love with yourself. It happens - some of us overestimate ourselves. It all boils down to knowing the basis of our self-worth: **our identity in Christ.** Apart from Jesus, we aren't capable of very much by eternal standards; in Him, we are valuable and capable of worthy service. Evaluating yourself by the worldly standards of success and achievement can cause you to think too much about your worth in the eyes of others and **then you miss your true value in God's eyes.** Some of us need to "let God be God" – and let Him forgive us – and also to let us forgive ourselves!

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost - Proper 21, September 26, 2010, Year C

There's an old Spanish story of a father and son who had a falling out. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him. He searched for months with no success. Finally, in a last ditch desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read: "Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father." On Saturday 800 "Pacos" showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers. The boy's father wanted to forgive – and there were 800 who yearned and wanted and were ready to accept that forgiveness. My brothers and sisters – God says to you today "meet Me, all is forgiven. I love you! I have made a way for your debt to be paid. Accept it; accept Yeshua – salvation – and be free – knowing that you can face Jesus, the Father and the Holy Spirit – without fear.