

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

Scripture: Mt. 18:15-35

"The Healing Power of Forgiveness"

THE CURSE IS ALIVE AND WELL

We gather together today for another Rock, Rods, and Relationships event. It's hard to believe this is our fourth annual gathering. And while there are classic cars, and games and food, we gather together because of the One who made us. The One who is the giver of life and of all that is good, pure and true. We come in Christ's Name to worship the Living God – forever the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. That's why we're really here today.

And one of the purposes of life is to experience God's healing power. To heal means to mend that which has been torn, to make whole that which is incomplete, to restore that which is broken. The truth is we live in a broken world. A world subject to doubt, discord, disease, and death. The fact remains that there is something intrinsically wrong with the human race. Our world is broken, it needs healing. Why is our world broken? The Bible tells us in **Jeremiah 17:9**: ***"The heart of man is more deceitful than all else and desperately sick; who can understand it?"*** Did you hear that? The human heart is desperately sick – it needs healing. The word in the Hebrew that is translated, "sick," can also be translated "corrupt," or "perverted."

And when the Bible talks about the human heart it is talking about the coming together of the mind, the will and the emotions. Some call this the "ego." Someone else has rightly said that the EGO simply means "Edging God Out." Well, we can edge God out but He won't be kept out. God keeps coming back because He loves us and because He loves us He is in the healing business. But it is a process. It doesn't happen overnight. It is an ongoing process because there are hurts we experience everyday and because our hearts without God are evil.

MAKING THINGS RIGHT AND WHOLE AGAIN

You know when you think about it, the whole history of mankind is God's process of healing that which is broken. And the number one area that God is concerned about when it comes to healing is our relationship with Him, and what follows directly after that is our relationship with others. You see healing just doesn't involve our bodies. It involves the whole person. And what is the key element in God's healing plan? Forgiveness. That my friends is the key to the healing of hearts, that is the key to the healing of relationships.

You see when Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their relationship with God and each other and all of creation was broken. They, in fact, were driven from the Garden, from God's presence. Why does God seem so distant to us? It still is a result of the Fall. It is a result of the curse. Many of us wish that God could just snap His fingers and make everything right. But God does not operate that way. There is a reason why we are told so many times in the Bible to ***"wait on the Lord."*** God works His plans through the instrument of time.

LEARNING FROM LEVITICUS

Now there is a book in the Old Testament that is often forgotten. Some wonder why it is even in the Bible with all its rules and regulations. But there is a good reason – Leviticus sets the stage for God's

plan of salvation, for the coming of the Messiah. Leviticus teaches us about the holiness of God and our need for healing. In fact, if you opened up Leviticus to the first few chapters you would find that there were descriptions of five main types of offerings that were to be given to the Lord.

There were *the sin and guilt offerings, the burnt offering*, and then *the grain and peace offerings*. Each had a specific purpose. The *sin and guilt offerings* were to show the people the reality of their sin, that they indeed were guilty, deserving death and that payment and justice had to be made and served for their sin. So an animal was sacrificed in the people's place. The *burnt offering* also was offered for the people and with this offering the sacrificed animal was totally consumed by fire. Why fire? To show God's holiness and the need for complete purification by Him and in response to show our need for complete dedication to Him. And then *the grain and peace offerings* were presented and a meal was shared together to show that fellowship had been restored (**Lev. 9:15-24**). Do you see what God was doing? He was setting things up to show us what needs to be done for our relationship to be restored with Him.

JESUS CHRIST IS GOD'S ONLY ANSWER TO MAN'S SIN

The problem with all these offerings is that they cannot truly deal with the heart. They are merely symbolic. Only God can change the heart. And only God can offer the perfect sacrifice to pay for our sin. And He offers Himself in the person of His Son, Jesus. Listen to what the Spirit of the Lord said through the prophet Isaiah 700 years before Christ came: "*He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed...*" (Is. 53:5).

Do you see what is being said? Jesus is our sin and guilt offerings. He is our burnt and peace offerings, and He calls to be utterly dedicated to Him, to take up our cross and die daily and follow him in response. As a result, we now can have an eternal relationship with God. Fellowship has been restored and this fellowship is grounded in God's forgiveness through Christ.

But how do we receive that forgiveness? By turning from our selfish and wicked ways and turning to Christ (repentance). We receive His forgiveness by letting God take control of our hearts. And once we turn to Jesus and recognize and follow Him as Lord we are forgiven – past, present, and future. Jesus' death secured eternal life for all those who put their faith in Him. And He grants us that forgiveness by virtue of His love and sacrifice on the cross. It is remarkable when you think about it - the most ungodly and brutal means of execution became the most powerful instrument of God's love and forgiveness.

You see sin is a reality. It is real. And we are guilty. But God says, I am still going to love you anyway. And I am going to demonstrate that love by not only paying your penalty, but I am going to forgive you as well. God gives us His grace and He shows us His mercy. Grace is getting what you don't deserve. And mercy is *not* getting what you deserve. So Christ's death satisfied God's justice and then paved the way for God to be able to forgive us!

That's why we are told in **Col. 1:13-14**: "*He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of our sins.*"

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN GOD FORGIVES?

I am reminded of a story that appeared in Reader's Digest some years ago. A contributor told of his Aunt Ruby and Uncle Arnie who had adopted a baby boy after five years of trying unsuccessfully to conceive. To their surprise, a short time after the adoption, Aunt Ruby discovered she was pregnant, and she later gave birth to a boy.

One day when the two boys were eight and nine years old, the nephew went to visit his aunt, and a woman in the neighborhood came to visit. Observing the children at play, the woman asked, "Which boy is yours, Ruby?" "Both of them," she replied. But the woman persisted. "But I mean, which one is adopted?" Aunt Ruby did not hesitate. She looked straight at her guest and replied, "I've forgotten."

When we are adopted as God's children, God chooses to forget our sins, to forget our wayward past, and to give us the full rights as His Sons and Daughters. He treats us as if we had never sinned.

HOW DO WE GIVE GOD'S FORGIVENESS?

But God's forgiveness is not cheap grace. We are called to go and do likewise. We are called to forgive. Someone has said, "*We are most like beasts when we kill. We are most like men when we judge. We are most like God when we forgive.*"

We heard from today's Gospel lesson from Matthew, Jesus say: "***If your brother sins against you, go and reprove him in private, if he listens you have won your brother.***"

...Peters asked, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."

Then Jesus gives us a parable that teaches that forgiveness is an absolute necessity. The parable of the righteous king and the wicked servant show us the obligation we have when it comes to forgiving others. God has forgiven us of all our sins and given us eternal life, how much more should we forgive those who have wronged us. And then Jesus closes with a warning about how we can't expect God's forgiveness if we don't forgive from the heart. That my friends is the key. Forgiveness from the heart. In other words, forgiveness is to be our attitude, it is to be our response. And that responsibility begins with us. Notice, that Jesus expects us always to go to the person who has sinned against us.

You see the goal is always reconciliation. Remember the peace offering in Leviticus? That was the last offering and it was the end result. Peace is God's goal for all relationships. And if we are to be reconciled we need to go to the person who has sinned against us. If they recognize their sin and apologize then there will be peace and the relationship has been restored. However, if they don't acknowledge their wrongs there is no reconciliation, but we still are to forgive them from our heart. The relationship will remain broken and there is nothing more for us to do except pray for that individual, but we cannot hold any unforgiveness in our hearts.

Do you see how repentance is a vital part of forgiveness and reconciliation? If our brother doesn't acknowledge their problem then it is between God and them. We are not to try to get even and strike out in vengeance. "***Vengeance is mine***" saith the Lord, "***I will repay.***" We are to release them to the Lord. We have done our part.

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost, July 20, 2008, Liturgical Year "A"

Shortly after the end of the Civil War, General Robert E. Lee was traveling through Virginia and came to home of a wealthy family. The woman who owned the home showed the General a beautiful large oak tree that had been in their front yard for generations. She complained how the cannon balls of the Union armies had mangled it and destroyed its beauty. She went on about how terrible it was that her tree had been ruined. The General, a man who had witnessed the carnage of many battles simply looked at the woman and said, "Ma'am, cut it down and forget about it." My friends, that is what God is telling us to do with many of the hurts of our past, "Cut them down and forget about them."

You see we must forgive from the heart when we are hurt and wronged, otherwise that seed of hurt will turn to bitterness and it will only lead to more hurt and pain. We must let it go. The Apostle Paul tells us in **Ephesians 4:31-32**: *"Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you."*

And we do this by faith. It is not based on feelings. Feelings come and go and there will be those feelings of unforgiveness that will creep back into our hearts – they may be triggered by a bad memory resurfacing, or something that hurts us in the present in a similar way or by seeing and hearing about that person who has hurt you. But we must let it go and give it to God each and every time. Otherwise, we will be enslaved to the spirit of unforgiveness. And it will lead to bitterness and anger and malice.

Of course, forgiveness does not mean we don't confront. Forgiveness does not mean that we simply be door mats. There must be accountability. There was a successful Irish boxer who came to Christ and eventually became a preacher. He happened to be in a new town setting up his evangelistic tent when a couple of tough thugs noticed what he was doing. Knowing nothing of his background, they made a few insulting remarks. The Irishman merely turned and looked at them. Pressing his luck, one of the bullies took a swing and struck a glancing blow on one side of the ex-boxer's face. He shook it off and said nothing as he turned the other cheek. The fellow took another glancing blow on the other side. At that point the preacher swiftly took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and said, "The Lord gave me no further instructions." Bam!

Seriously, there must be accountability but there also must be a willingness to move forward to work to restore broken relationships. That is why Jesus came to heal our relationships with our Heavenly Father. We must make it our aim to be reconcilers and we do this through forgiveness. I close with the following powerful example.

BRUTALLY ATTACKED YET ABLE TO FORGIVE

Back in 1974, Chris Carrier of Coral Gables, Florida, was abducted when he was 10 years old. His kidnapper, angry with the boy's family, burned him with cigarettes, stabbed him numerous times with an ice pick, then shot him in the head and left him to die in the Everglades. Remarkably, the boy survived, though he lost sight in one eye. However, no one was ever arrested because the boy could not identify his abductor in a police line-up.

22 years later Carrier received word from the Coral Gables Police Department that the man they had always thought had done it confessed. David McAllister, now a 77-year-old ex-convict, frail and blind, was living in a North Miami Beach nursing home. It was long past the statute of limitations, so there was nothing legally that could be done.

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What would Carrier, now a youth minister, do? Over the years when he gave his testimony, people would ask what Carrier what he would do if he could talk to the man who tried to kill him. Carrier always said he would jump at the chance. Now it was here. I would like to now share Chris Carrier's exact words:

"I went with a trusted pastor friend and a reporter from the NBC affiliate in Miami. It was awkward. What do you say to someone who'd tried to kill you?"

At first, McAllister denied trying to kill me. But as the pastor questioned him gently, he admitted he had dropped me off in the Everglades and left me. He held my hand and apologized for what he had done. I told him that I had forgiven him. As I left, I told McAllister to have a good night's rest. "I will now," he replied.

I (then) visited often, introducing him to my wife and two girls, offering him hope and some semblance of family in the days before his death, less than a month later. I shared the gospel with him, and he trusted in Christ. He was always glad when I came by. I believe that our friendship eased his loneliness and was a great relief to him after 22 years of regrets. He told reporters from CNN I was the best friend he'd ever had.

I know the world might view me as the victim of a horrible tragedy, but I consider myself the "victim" of many miracles. The fact that I'm alive and have no mental deficiencies defies the odds. I've been blessed in countless ways

Carrier later said, "While many people can't understand how I could forgive David McAllister, from my point of view I couldn't not forgive him. If I'd chosen to hate him all these years, or spent my life looking for revenge, then I wouldn't be the man I am today, the man my wife and children love, the man God has helped me to be."

Do you want to be healed of past hurts? Do want spiritual healing in your relationship with God? Then accept God's forgiveness and forgive others as you have been forgiven by God. Let us pray...