

September 14, 2008

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Year A, Proper 19 (Matthew 18:21-35)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

The Rev'd Charles M. Girardeau, associate rector

Forgive, As You Have Been Forgiven

On Friday night, November 8, 1996, a powerful rainstorm rushed thorough Atlanta. The next morning my parents discovered a quantity of water on the dining room floor, flowing from beneath the baseboards. They were not sure where the water had come from, but it was evident that there was some kind of leak. Juts a few minutes later there was a knock on their door, and a burly man presented himself as a roofer who was simply driving through the neighborhood and seeing if any folks had had a problem with their roofs the night before. Bingo. It appeared that an angel had appeared at my parent's home.

Within a short time he had found the problem. Raccoons had knawed a hole in the eve of the house, and water had obviously blown in there. AND the roof was in very bad shape, with moss growing in many places. It needed to be replaced. To make his point even better, he took my then seventy-three-year-old mother up a ladder and across the slippery room. She confirmed his finding, and after signing a hand written contract for the roof replacement and eve repair and writing him a check, Bert the roofer called his crew and they appeared rather quickly. Soon the gutters had been removed from the house and the first of the old shingles were removed. Within a very short time, the roof was stripped and the bare wood of the spaced decking was exposed. And then, everyone left. Sunday came and went without any tarps being place upon the exposed roof. Calls were place to Bert. He would be back at 10:00 the next morning.

I arrived at 9:30, to find Bert about to leave the house with yet another check, for several thousand dollars, "because of the extensiveness of the damage that has been found." "You're going to cover the roof with tarps, aren't you?" I asked. "No, that will cost me money; you can't tell me what to do." "You will cover the roof with tarps before the day is out. It is supposed to rain tomorrow." "No", he responded as he climbed into his unmarked van and drove off. In just a few minutes he was calling on the phone, demanding cash, "because today is Veteran's Day and your bank is closed." Thus began a very difficult time for my family.

To make a long story short: We had Thanksgiving dinner under the "Bert blue tarps". The same was true for Christmas dinner and New Year's Day celebration. The ombudsman for Elder Fraud of the Governor's Office was on the case and consumer reporter Virginia Gunn had featured Bert the roofer on a special weekday report because my parents were not his only victims.

Towards the end of the first week in January we fired Bert, and as he left the house he shoved me out of his way. I told him not to return to the property, and that I was on my way to take out a restraining order on him. He cursed loudly, slammed his fist down on the trunk of one of my parent's cars, and pealed out of the driveway cursing all the way. I stood at the top of the driveway and placed two words together, VERY intentionally, that one might say after slamming a thumb with a hammer. The first word was God. I'll let you guess the second one. I broke one of the big ten, very intentionally. And I added, "God, I really mean it." And then I repeated my condemnation. I REALLY meant it. No forgiveness possible if I had anything to say about it.

I wonder about the reason for Peter's question today. Jesus has been teaching about how those who follow Him are to behave for a while now. Peter comes and asks about the very thing we all desire and need, forgiveness, but that which we oftentimes are so unwilling to give. Perhaps Andrew, literally his

brother and one of the disciples, had done something over and over again that had finally broken “the camel’s back” and Peter was at the end of his rope. The rabbi’s taught that a good Hebrew was to forgive three times, a teaching gleaned from the prophet Amos. The fourth time, any response was allowed. Peter had doubled that number and had added one more for good measure. “Is seven times enough. Jesus?” Peter asks. “No, I tell you, seventy times seven.” Apparently unlimited offers and efforts are in order for those who follow Jesus.

The meaning of the parable Jesus tells is pretty easy to understand. The king is God. The first slave is any and every Christian. The amount of money owed to the king would be over a million dollars. The slave can not begin to pay, but pleads for patience and makes a commitment that would be next to impossible to keep, “I WILL pay you.” He could never pay this amount of money. The king, God, forgives and absorbs the debt. It is forgiven. The slave is forgiven.

But then the slave encounters someone who owes him the equivalent of twenty dollars. He grabs him by the throat and demands immediate payment. The second slave says the exact same thing as the first had said, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” No forgiveness here – the first slave throws the second into prison. When the king hears about this the first slave is thrown into prison to be tortured until his debt is paid. And Jesus warns us, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

There are four churches along Braselton Highway one mile north of Hamilton Mill Road, one of them my previous parish, and a fifth church just around the corner. It was always interesting to watch the people exiting from church driveways when our worship services would end at about the same time each week. Most folks carried their worship experience at least as far as back onto the highway, but then there were those that seemed to forget about what they had just done as soon as they closed the car door and placed the key into the ignition.

Forgiveness is to be a way of life for us who follow Jesus. The old saying “Don’t get even,” is not the way we are to think or act. Nor is the Old Testament teaching, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” often misunderstood as the minimum response to a wrong, when actually it is a law that sets the maximum response – no MORE than an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth – the way we are to think, act or live out our relationships.

We are to forgive.

I soon realized that my condemnation of Bert was not right, and that it in fact was having an affect on my spiritual well being, and was a blot on my soul. I sought out a trusted priest, made my confession using the rite of the Reconciliation of a Penitent, asking forgiveness for my actions and the removal of my curse. And then I knew I had been freed from a burden and he had been released from my comdenantion.

And Burt, well the legal system caught up to him soon enough. And he was thrown into prison.

We are to forgive. Why?

Because we have been forgiven. Our debt has been paid. The sacrifice for us has been made. Our brokenness made whole.

The forgiven slave left the presence of the king and proceeded to grab his fellow debtor by the throat.

Jesus came and lived among us and then reached out His loving arms on the hard wood of the cross, that we might come within the reach of God's saving embrace.

We are to forgive, as we have been forgiven.

Amen.