

In Nomine Jesu

LIVING UNDER FORGIVENESS

Our sermon for this National Veterans' Day is drawn forth from today's readings. Hear again the Word of God:

Then, Peter having come alongside, he said to Him, "O Lord, how much will he sin against me, my brother, and I will forgive him? Until seven times?"

Jesus says to him, "Not, I continue to say to you, unto seven (times), but unto seventy times seven!"¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Fellow veterans, you who are related to us, or you who are simply here to support and give thanks for the service of all U.S. Military veterans: God has gathered us here today to recall and receive His gift of forgiveness. That He offers to all for the sake of His Son, the Messiah. He is none other than the Jesus who was crucified into death, bodily raised to everlasting life, ascended to the position of highest power over all things. He will return on the clouds with power and great glory. Those who continue to receive His blood-bought forgiveness will be caught up with Him on that Last Day. They will be reunited with those who have died in Him to live and reign with Him forever in a new heavens and new earth.

All of that is good news that needs to continue to be declared this day. As you have repeatedly heard, it all flows from forgiveness. Forgiveness from one's comrades, and forgiveness from the One Who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier is a daily need for every human

¹ *Matthew* 18: 21-22.

being. Whether the need for forgiveness is recognized, acknowledged or even moves a person to request it, it is still there. With that in mind: would you rather have justice applied to you when you err or forgiveness?

No one, not one of us perfect. God is truly just. Good human systems of governance are established to reward the just. Justice is a daily reality we face. Because we are not perfect, we are daily likely to be unjust with others. We should know that we all deserve justice. On account of that, we possess the need to hear, receive, and share forgiveness. Even so, our society upholds individual rights and happiness to be the highest good. There is a genuine reluctance to ask for forgiveness, let alone offer it as a free gift to others.

For generations, in the U.S. military, there has been a culture of justice. We were taught to tolerate no mistakes and to offer no forgiveness. There is a climate of justice in the Armed Services. Many of us still remember the Uniform Code of Military Justice – with all its answers to every mistake, minor offense and major crime that could be conceivably committed by any service-member.

Yet, we should know that even that long-vetted system of justice is not perfect. For example, most of us are familiar with a recent decision concerning a soldier who walked away from his post in Afghanistan. There are reports that many veterans are angry that he was simply reduced to the lowest rank, fined and given no prison time.

Others may reflect on another failure of the military justice system. That allowed a criminal with a court-martial conviction, bad conduct

discharge, along with guilt in other civil crimes, to continue to violate the law and obtain firearms. Many in our nation are hurt and enraged that the system enabled conditions that made it possible for him to slaughter innocent people in a Texas church.

Guys like those we do not want to forgive. We want justice! So, even if we do believe in forgiveness, we look for ways to limit how much we have to forgive such evil men. Justice must be served. This is exactly what one of Jesus' closest followers was trying to determine when he asked Him,

*"O Lord, how much will he sin against me, my brother, and I will forgive him? Until seven times?"*²

Peter, a small business owner, a devout Jewish Israelite of the first century A.D., would have been familiar with rabbinic discussions concerning forgiveness. In discussions concerning forgiveness, the rabbis taught that forgiving a brother up to three times was an acceptable maximum.³ Later they were compiled into that which was called the *Babylonian Talmud*. The Rabbis had used the books of *Amos* and *Job* to support their teaching.

Peter, in offering seven times as the maximum allowed to forgive a person who repeatedly sinned against him, was displaying great generosity. He had doubled rabbinical teaching, and then added one, to bring his forgiveness to completion.

That should indicate to us that he who had been following Jesus for quite some time had caught onto His revelations about grace, mercy and

² *Matthew* 18:21b.

³ *Yoma*, p. 340, 111.16.

forgiveness. Peter's offer of seven times forgiveness indicates that he was beginning to comprehend true Wisdom. He certainly would have heard, known and believed that forgiveness flows forth from writings such as we heard today, teachings like these:

*You have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life...⁴ and
The path of righteous men (is) as light, brightness which (is) shining bright unto full day.⁵*

Yes, Peter appears to have grasped the Truth from such texts. His offer of extended forgiveness showed that he believed that those who have been delivered from death's grasp, from falling into unrepentant sin, who have been declared right with God, are to be light in this fallen world. So, as he was on the path that leads to the fullness of God's eternal day, he offered to forgive a brother who sinned against him with a complete measure of grace – up to seven times. He wanted to reflect forgiveness!

How many times are you willing to shine forth with forgiveness? What is your limit for someone who has violated your trust, who has continued to wrong you, one that is a repeat sinner against you? Are you stuck with, "three strikes and you are out?"

Many of us have lived and worked in that mindset. It used to be military command practice to give a verbal warning to an offender; then have the lowest ranking supervisor give a written warning; and then, if no change in rule-breaking behavior had occurred, to have the commander

⁴ Psalm 56:13, ESV

⁵ Proverbs 4:18

effect disciplinary measures.

How many times have you been allowed to get to strike four, or five, or six, or seven in your life? On account of that, are you really generous in giving forgiveness? Are you willing to offer grace over justice to a truly repentant person, no matter how many times he or she sins against you? It is possible that you know what the rules allow, but desire to give an offender a few more times to learn and grow. Hear again, from the mind of God, what that entails:

Jesus says to him, "Not, I continue to say to you, unto seven (times), but unto seventy times seven!"⁶

In the two examples of apparently failed military justice cited earlier, the second man, Devin Patrick Kelly, has fallen into the hands of the Living God. There is no need for humans to offer him forgiveness. He is dead. God is His just and eternal Judge.

Even so, those who appear to have not followed the rules that might have prevented him from having access to weapons that were to be illegal for him to bear, are going to need forgiveness. We can but imagine the guilt that will bear down upon their consciences as they are brought to justice. They, who will receive judgement in God's good time, will need to hear of forgiveness, even as they should receive any just penalties due them.

On the other hand, Bowe Bergdahl, having received the penalty assigned to him for his crimes by a military judge, will also need to hear of God's grace and forgiveness. Private Bergdahl will live with that which he

⁶ *Matthew* 18:21-22.

has done for the rest of his life. Even so, it is not God's will that he lives with his sins, his crimes, for eternity. He needs God's grace and mercy.

If that thought offends you, hear this reality: God, in Christ Jesus bore the sins of all humans, for all time, into death on the cross. He Who was sinless became sin for Bowe, and also for you. He took on Himself the punishment that all sinners deserve – for God is the just God. Jesus shed His blood to wash sin, and its eternal consequences, away from all sinners.

That is an accomplished fact. There is irrefutable proof of Jesus. He lived. He died. (Even non-Christian historians attest to those truths). He rose from the dead. All the lies in the world could not stop His followers – including the same Peter who denied Jesus as the Christ was headed onto the cross. All human fiction that denies Jesus' resurrection did not prevent Jesus' followers from holding onto their confessions of Him as the Christ into their own horrible deaths which were effected according to human justice. His first faithful disciples believed, unto death and into eternal life in Christ, that the Jesus Who forgave those who sinned against Him as He breathed His last on the Cross, that living Jesus would grant them forgiveness and eternal life in Him, no matter how many times they sinned and returned to Him for forgiveness.

The faithful disciples of old continue to declare that the just God fulfills His justice in continuing to forgive sinners. He forgives you, that you might have life in Him. That means that you who have received His forgiveness are free to continue to forgive those who sin against you.

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

National Veterans' Day Sermon

Trinity XXI, Saturday

Psalm 56; Proverbs 4:11-20; Psalm 147:3; Matthew 18:21-35

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Soli Deo Gloria