

Forgiveness Can Cease to Be Elusive and Difficult, when We See It as an Unconditional Gift of Grace, More than Something Achieved or Done from Human Strength or Effort

"When I was six years old, I walked out the doors of my grade school one day to find my father waiting for me at the bottom of the steps," the Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander said in his sermon Sunday. "His big black car was parked on the side of the street, and it was loaded full with his belongings. He informed me that he was leaving, moving to Arizona to work at a ranch. He gave me a hug. Then he walked back to his car, and walked out of my life. I stood there and watched as that big black car got smaller and smaller, until it was gone. That was almost 40 years ago, but I remember it like it was yesterday.

"I spent the next 25 years of my life angry," Pastor Thelander continued. "Angry at myself, and angry at my dad. In my heart I said, 'I can *never* forgive him for what he did.'

"As a pastor, I've had occasion through the years to listen to people and to counsel people who have been deeply hurt. Many times, I heard them say to me what I said to myself through the years: 'I can *never* forgive that person for what was done.'

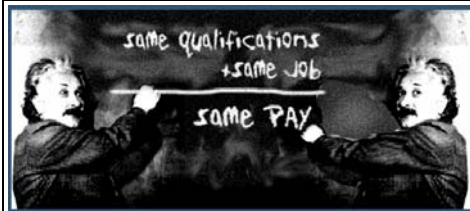
"C.S. Lewis was on to something. Forgiveness is so wonderful, so beautiful, so Christian—until we have something to forgive. When you've been hurt, and when forgiveness seems so difficult and elusive, what do you do? What do we do with those words, 'seventy times seven'? What do you do when forgiving someone seems beyond your reach or your capability?"

"Return with me to our Gospel lesson. Jesus tells the disciples a parable here of a King who wanted to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. One servant was brought in whose debt was beyond calculation and beyond comprehension. He and his whole family were going to be sold into slavery to pay the unpayable.

"But he pleaded with the King, and notice what the King did. The King did not say, 'Work out an alternate way for this man to pay what he owes.' In an act of incomprehensible mercy, the King forgave the debt.

"Subsequently, this man who has just been forgiven his debt goes to another man who owes him some chump change, grabs him by the throat, and demands to be paid back. The debtor pleads with him for a little more time, but to no avail. He has him arrested and thrown into jail.

"One point that becomes glaringly obvious to us here from (p. 2→)



When Jesus said the Kingdom of Heaven is like the owner of an estate who sent workers into the vineyard, some in early morning, some around 9 a.m., some at noon, some around 3 p.m., and others at 5 p.m., and yet all were paid the same at the end of the day, did his point have anything to do with the message in the image above? We'll hear this story Sunday in the Gospel reading, and maybe we'll find out. Image credit: equalpayforequalwork.blogspot.com

Sermon (cont'd.) this story, especially as we struggle to forgive others, is the fact that forgiveness is never just a transaction between us and someone else. *Forgiveness is a transaction between God and us, and between us and someone else.* Our forgiving someone else is never separated from divine grace, from the salvation we receive in Christ . . .

"If we view forgiveness as something merely between us and someone else, it will always remain difficult and elusive for us. But if we see forgiveness as something between God and us, and between us and the other, and between the other and God, then something happens. Forgiveness then becomes an unconditional gift of grace and a process of discovery, more than something achieved or done from human strength or effort.

"If we see only the pain caused to us by another, if it is only about them and us—then forgiving may indeed be difficult if not impossible. But if we see the pain in terms of God and us, us and them, and them and God, that changes things. It changes *us*.

"It took the Holy Spirit more than 25 years to teach me this lesson. Talk about slow learners! But one ordinary day as I sat in the library at Emmanuel College on the campus of the University of Toronto, I sat back in my chair and stopped what I was doing. I didn't hear an audible voice or anything, but in that moment something became very clear to me. I realized that if I wanted to continue my relationship with Jesus, I needed to do something about my relationship with my dad.

"Psychologist Steven Sandage says it this way: 'Forgiveness involves surveying the damage one incurred through the harmful actions of another and eventually remembering it differently rather than trying to erase it from memory. It is choosing to give up resentment and retaliation. . . .'

"I'd like to think that is exactly what I did on that day in Toronto, but the truth is that it was something *God* did through the Spirit—because it was in that moment that I began to see things not in terms of my dad and me, but in terms of God and me, and my dad and me, and my dad and God. It was in that moment that I realized that what I was unwilling to do for my dad, God had already done for me. . . .

"If you want to learn and practice forgiveness in your life, one of the best things you can do is to come to the Lord's table as often as you can. . . . How often may we take Communion? Has Jesus put a quota on us? . . . From what I know of Jesus, he would say that his grace is available as long as there is need. And the grace we receive here gives us the courage—and the desire—to forgive our brothers and sisters, from the heart."

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Sundays, 9:00 a.m.: Chesterton discussion series

Sundays, 10:00 a.m.: Word & Table Service

Sundays, 11:30 a.m.: Refreshments, conversation

Sundays, 11:45 a.m.: Moderated discussion

Thursdays, 7:00 p.m.: Evening Prayers

For the Poor: Meat, fresh produce; canned fruits and vegetables; dairy products; peanut butter; cooking oil; pancake mix; syrup; spices; diapers; baby wipes; bathroom tissue; for personal care: soap, shampoo, conditioner, razors, shaving cream; new underwear (adults and children); cleaning supplies; bleach.

Readings, 9/21: Jonah 3:10–4:11; Ps. 145:1–8;

Phil. 1:21–27; Mt. 20:1–16. **9/28:** Ezek. 18:1–4,

25–32; Ps. 25:1–9; Phil. 2:1–13; Mt. 21:28–32.

Prayer Emphases: Spain; United Church of Canada; St. Aidan's Episcopal Church, San Francisco, CA, and the Rev. Tommy Dillon II; Children, Inc.; parishioners on Winstead Court.

G. K. Chesterton's Orthodoxy:

Sunday's 9 a.m. discussion: "Keeping One's Wits", based on chapter 2, "The Maniac". For discussion questions, the chapter's text, and notes of the previous discussion, visit the church Website.

