

## 3-10-19 Forgiveness Sunday

© T. Hardenbrook

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Well, brothers and sisters. Here we are, at the doorway, the very threshold of great Lent. We have finished the weeks of preparation before Lent. The soil of our hearts has been moistened by the rain of self examination. And the plow of spiritual athleticism has been prepared for us. The Church stands ready to pull that plow for us with its services and its instruction, and will even help us steer so that the furloughs will be straight. All that is left for us to do is to take the handles in our hands and not look back. That is to say “yes” to the invitation, to submit to what Christ and the Holy Spirit stand ready to do for us, and to us. To heal and to strengthen us. And as we sang in Vespers last night, to restore us as kings and queens of creation. Rulers upon the Earth over all things visible, and companions to the angels. This is our goal.

By the grace of God, we have made an effort to humble ourselves as the publican did. We have begun to repent in our hearts, as did the prodigal. From our seed of faith has blossomed, fear of God and his last judgment, and now on this Sunday of the Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, this Sunday of forgiveness, we stand ready to be forgiven entirely. Eternally forgiven. For on forgiveness hangs our ability to return to the state of paradise, to overcome the fall, and continue on towards purity and perfection.

In Vespers last night, and Matins this morning, we heard Adam speaking many words. Some of the words that he spoke are these. Listen to this, this is the voice of Adam articulated by the Church. “The Lord, my creator, took me as dust from the Earth. And he honored me. But Satan, the deceiver, separated me from the glory of God. O compassionate Master, call me back again. Bring me back into Paradise. O Paradise, no more shall I take pleasure in your joy. O most holy Paradise, planted for my sake, pray to God for me. He who made you and fashioned me, that one more I may take pleasure in your flowers. O precious Paradise, unsurpassed in beauty, unending gladness and delight, where I took my delight in fair and pleasing fruits that never passed away. With the rustling of your leaves, pray to the Maker of all.”

And having heard the words of Adam, the Savior says, “When he returns to me, I will not reject him.” And having ourselves fallen like Adam and having repented and turned homeward like the Prodigal, we now have things to do. Inner convictions begin to manifest themselves in our outer deeds; we have fallen away from God because of spiritual sloth. But now, we return to Him through spiritual action. Adam sinned, therefore we ask for forgiveness. Adam ate, therefore we fast. Adam brought forth weeds and thistles of the soil and of the heart, therefore we plow the Earth and our hearts, that their good fruits might be restored, that Paradise might once again be regained and even surpassed.

And having in faith recognized our brokenness, and repented in our hearts, we first of all things seek forgiveness and forgiving with everyone around us - our friends and our enemies alike. For if we are to be forgiven by God, if we are to knock once again at the doors of Paradise and be welcomed in, we must first forgive our neighbors.

As you heard in the Gospel reading this morning, the Lord said, “If you forgive me ...” It. Forgive me. That was hilarious. You just didn't get it. The Lord said, “If you forgive men, their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, their trespasses,

## 3-10-19 Forgiveness Sunday

© T. Hardenbrook

neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." This is what I like to refer to as one of the big "ifs" of Christ. There are many "ifs" and "whens" in the Holy Scriptures that we have to pay close attention to.

And there is little more to be said after we hear these words from Christ about why we should forgive people, no matter what they do. They hurt us, they lie to us, they betray us, they forgive us, they cheat us, manipulate, gossip about, disappoint, and reject us. Whether they slander or disgust us, irritate, hate, or abuse us, whether they take our homes, whether they destroy our families, whether they imprison us and torture us, whether they peel our skin from our flesh and bones and feed us to the wild animals, we must forgive them if we are to be forgiven ourselves. The Lord said, "If you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Now other than our basic lack of faith that we struggle with day to day, I believe that when people make an effort to enter into forgiveness, there are two conditions contrived by pride, ultimately, that make it very difficult to repent. The first is a subtle idea that we only have to forgive people whose sins are proportional to our own. If I gossip, I freely forgive others that gossip, but liars and thieves, no. If I steal, I forgive other thieves, and covet those who covet, but not murderers. They're much worse than me. Or how about this one? That he who has the bigger sin has to ask for forgiveness first? And in this concoction of thought, we somehow conceive, convince ourselves that because our sins is arguably less severe than that of others, we can reserve from them the fullness of our forgiveness. Or forgiveness at all.

But this habit is only possible when we have separated our minds from the words of Christ, for he says specifically, "When you pray, say forgive us our debts as have forgiven our debtors. And if you forgive men their trespasses, that is their sins against us, no matter what they are. You also, that's the promise. You also will be forgiven; and if you do not forgive, you will not forgiven.

So there is no comparison between sins being made here. There's no balance weighing the sum total of our sins in comparison to our neighbors. As if the top 50% are the ones who are going to go to Heaven. We are either pursuing the state of forgiveness, and are in the process of being forgiven, or we are not. And it is a state that we achieve in relationship, exclusively in relationship with our neighbor, our enemy, and God. There's no more forgiveness in isolation than there is love in isolation. Think about that. There is no more forgiveness in isolation than there is love in isolation.

They both require communion with another. And struggling against sin that is aestheticism in many forms, cooperates with forgiveness, but it is actually secondary to it. That is why we do not wait until some time has passes between sinning and confessing, although our pride and joys creating that buffer. We run to our neighbor and to our priests with the sin still festering on us, that we might be forgiven and reunited with God, and our neighbor as soon as possible. For nothing is worse for the human being to be separated from communion with God and neighbor.

So the thought that our degree of participation in forgiveness can be qualified to any degree by how we have been sinned against is a lie to ourselves, and we must cast it off. If we do not

## 3-10-19 Forgiveness Sunday

© T. Hardenbrook

forgive, we are not forgiven. The second condition conceived by pride within ourselves that makes entering into forgiveness difficult is this idea that we have not sinned greatly enough, alone or in relation to another, to necessitate asking forgiveness of God and our neighbor. We see our sins as understandable, justifiable.

Yet believing this temptation of thought is only when we forgive the real effects of sin. One of the great lies of Satan is to suggest to us that sin can be isolated and qualified, that we can restrain its effects maybe to only ourselves, and that we can sin with some degree of responsibility, or secrecy, or in some sort of spiritual isolation, where I only am the victim of my sin.

But sin cannot, it cannot be contained, and it cannot be isolated. It is the absence of love, and it ripples through everything around us, it cools and empties, and it de-sanctifies to some degree everyone and everything that it can. It separates us from God, and the nature of that separation affects everyone and everything around us.

And when we believe this, and begin to observe it, we come to peace with the conviction that we always have something for which we can be forgiven, always. That is we can always gain a better foothold on the steps of Paradise through repentance and forgiveness. We can cheat in, and cheat Satan of our claim to us. We come to our brother and sister, and no details perhaps even need to be shared. Known or unknown, we are confident that we have affected them negatively in some way through our sins. We humble ourselves and the grace of mutual forgiveness washes over us, bringing with it joy and deep comfort, and deep Communion. For there can be no true fast, even though its Lent. There can be no genuine repentance, even though it is Forgiveness Sunday. There can be no reconciliation with God unless we are at the same time reconciled with each other.

So let us enter into the joyous battle of Lent, invigorated with mutual forgiveness and boldly setting our strengths against our weaknesses. We are an army here of Christ, and the spoils of this war are far beyond compare. Let us all consider the guidelines of Lent, the fast and the services, and within ourselves, compete for a degree of self-denial, that our spiritual advisor blesses as an honorable goal. Let us confess early in Lent, not waiting until the very end. For having participated in forgiveness Vespers tonight, what more confidence can we have in approaching confession than the fact we have already exchanged mutual forgiveness with all of our brothers and sisters. Let us cast off weakness and spiritual sloth, that the vigor and grace of spiritual athleticism might shine honorably within us.

In closing, we should reflect upon what we have just sung in Matins this morning. We sang these words that call us to be gladiators - have that image in your mind - to be gladiators of spiritual adventure and courage. We sing these words. "Let us set out with joy upon the season of the fast with joy." With joy, not with hesitation or sadness.

"Let us set out with joy upon the season of the fast and prepare ourselves for spiritual combat. Let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light, that having sailed across the great sea of the fast, we may reach the third day resurrection of our Lord. The arena of the virtues have been opened to you. Let all who wish to compete for the prize now enter, girding

## 3-10-19 Forgiveness Sunday

© T. Hardenbrook

themselves for the noble contest of the fast. For those that strive according to the rules will be justly crowned in the end. Taking up the armor of the cross, let us make war against the enemy. Let us have our invincible fortress, the faith, prayer as our breastplate and almsgiving as our helmet. And as our sword, let us use fasting, that cuts away evil from our hearts." If we do this - if we do this, like if we forgive our brothers - if we do this, we shall receive the true crown of victory from Christ on the Day of Judgment. Through the prayers of all the saints, O Lord Jesus Christ of God, have mercy upon us and save us. Amen.