

Proper 19, Year A

Exodus 14:19-31

Psalm 114

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

Good morning and
welcome to St. Anne's.

This time last week
Hurricane Irma was making its arrival,
and while things here in Tifton
ended up far less destructive
than they could have been,
it has nonetheless
been an unusual week.

For some of you I know
it has been a *hard* week
with no water, no electricity,
and maybe a tree or two
on your house.

I'm glad everyone's okay,
and I hope things are
getting back to normal for you.

Here at St. Anne's,
our plan today was to have
this one combined service,
and then dozens of us
were going to board buses
and drive to Honey Creek
to hear our Presiding Bishop preach
at a good old-fashioned tent revival.

But with no water, no electricity,
and a LOT of trees down over there,
our much anticipated revival
has been postponed to January 20.

So, instead, here we are.
And what better way to spend a Sunday
than to worship together,
to give thanks to God together,
and to gorge on a post-hurricane potluck together?

There's nothing quite like
Communion and comfort food
to heal the soul and
restore balance to the universe.

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Now. What about today's sermon?

In many ways
today's message is as simple
and uncomplicated as it gets.

I read this Gospel,
and I am tempted to issue
a two-word sermon:

Just forgive.

Or for those of you
who prefer something longer,
here's the five-word version:

Just shut up and forgive.

And yet, if you have ever
found yourself in the position
of having to forgive someone,
you know it's not that easy.

Simple, yes.
Easy, no.

So today,
I simply want to lift up
three essential truths
to help us understand forgiveness more deeply
as we have come to know it
in our Lord Jesus Christ:

1. Forgiveness is a way of life.

2. Forgiveness is essential for us as the Church.

3. Forgiveness is a gift.

* * *

**Number one:
Forgiveness is a way of life.**

When Peter asks,
“Lord, how often should I forgive?”
he already has an answer in his back pocket:
“As many as seven times?”

Perhaps Peter thought
Jesus would hear his gracious “seven”
and tell him to move
to the head of the class.
Not so.

“No,” Jesus says,
“not seven times,
but, I tell you,
seventy-seven times.”

What Jesus is saying
is that forgiveness
is not just a switch that you flip.
It’s not a decision that you make.
It’s not a thing that you do once-and-for-all—
or even seven-and-for-all—
and then move on.

No. Anyone who has ever
had to forgive someone else
can tell you:

Forgiveness is a commitment.
Forgiveness is a process.
Forgiveness is a way of life.

It’s a mentality that says:
I will not let my anger and my hurts define me.
I will not become my own resentments.

As United Methodist pastor Jason Micheli recently put it,
“forgiveness is only possible for us because
we have found a more compelling use for our life
not dependent on the grudge or the hurt
someone else [has placed upon us].”¹

¹ Micheli, Jason. “15th Sunday After Pentecost - The God We’re Stuck With.” Podcast. *Strangely Warmed*. Crackers & Grape Juice, 11 September 2017. Web. 13 September 2017. Emphasis added.

Forgiveness is a way of life.

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**Number two:
Forgiveness is essential for us as the Church.**

Notice that when Peter asks his question,
he says, “Lord, what do I do if another member
of the *church* sins against me?”

Peter’s not just asking about forgiveness in general.
Peter’s asking about forgiveness
among the *disciples*,
among the *believers*,
among the *Church*.

No wonder.
We Christians
are quite capable
of hurting one another.

This is why every time
I meet with newcomers at St. Anne’s—
every time I hold my Episcopal 101 class—
I go out of my way to say
something they never expect to hear:

“We. Are going. To hurt you.”

They look at me like I’m crazy,
but I go on to say,
“Listen . . . we’re glad you’re here,
and I truly hope you feel called
to make St. Anne’s your new church home.

“But I am telling you here and now:
the day *will* come
when I will say something or do something—
or someone else at this church
will say something or do something—
that is going to
offend you,
or disappoint you,
or hurt you deeply.

“Hopefully it will be unintentional,
but even unintentional wounds
can bring about lasting scars.

“So choose now.
While you’re excited,
while everything’s still fresh,
while St. Anne’s seems so full of possibility,
choose now what you will do
when that day comes.

“Because you may choose to leave,
but if you choose to stay—
if you choose to tell the truth,
if you choose to say, ‘You know, what you did really hurt me,’
if you choose to hang in there—
that is when God’s grace actually has a chance.
That is when we become the real Church.
That is when our life together matters most.
Everything up ‘til then is just the honeymoon.”²

To me as a priest,
the saddest thing in our life together
is when someone stops coming to church
because of something
someone else said or did.

If we don’t have forgiveness with one another,
we don’t have anything.

Forgiveness is essential for us as the Church.

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**Number three:
Forgiveness is a gift.**

All of this makes it sound like
forgiveness is a ton of work.
And it is.

But for us Christians,
forgiveness is *more* than that.
It goes *deeper* than that.

² This bit of wisdom is not original to me but is something I picked up from Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber. Bolz-Weber, Nadia. *Patrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*. New York: Jericho Books, 2013.

Forgiveness isn't just something
we summon from within ourselves.
Like most things worth having,
forgiveness is a gift
that comes from *beyond* us.

In the parable Jesus tells today,
the king forgives the slave's debt
without any need for payment.
It's pure gift.
It's pure grace,
free and clear.
The slave's forgiveness—
and his ability to forgive others—
comes from beyond him.

But what does the slave do?
Instead of going and doing likewise,
he hardens his heart
and holds everyone else's debts against them.
Turns out, the king has no patience for this,
and neither does God.

The thing about you and me
is that we walk this earth
a forgiven people—
gift and grace, free and clear—
thanks to what God has done for us
in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Whoever you are,
whatever your sins,
whatever your wrongdoings,
whatever those things are
that you hide deep within yourself
in the hopes that no one will ever find out:
God already knows,
and God has already forgiven you.

By the work of Jesus Christ on the cross,
you are forgiven: gift and grace, free and clear.

God has not held his grudge against you.
Who are you to hold your grudge against another?

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Forgiveness is a way of life.
Forgiveness is essential for us as the Church.
Forgiveness is a gift.

It is the story of our salvation.
It is the lifeblood of who God is for us.
It is who we are meant to be for one another.

Forgiveness, I know, is not easy.
But in the end, forgiveness actually *is* pretty simple.

So, whoever you are,
whatever grudges you hold this day,
whatever your hurts may be,
bring them to this altar
where you yourself have been forgiven
a thousand times over, and—
whether for the first time,
or the seventh time,
or the seventy-seventh time—
hand it over, and let it go.

Or, to sum it up
in an overly crude,
overly simple
five-word sermon:

Just shut up and forgive.

Amen.