

“Forgive And Forgiven”

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who was born a babe in Bethlehem, grace to you and peace.

John the Baptist appeared in the desert, proclaiming a baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

It is not without reason, it seems, that the beginning of the church’s liturgical year talks about the forgiveness of sins. Advent starts, as you heard in today’s gospel reading, with John’s baptism for the forgiveness of sins – and come to think of it Easter ends with the risen Jesus proclaiming, “Receive the Holy Spirit; whose sins you shall forgive are forgiven them.” Forgiveness hits a tender spot. We all have done some stupid and immoral things, from snivelling lies to large betrayals – and worse. None of us wants the burdens of shame and guilt as we live. We want forgiveness. None of us really wants justice when we die. We want mercy.

Oddly, and perhaps disturbing enough, it sometimes seems, at least according to Jesus’ teaching, that such forgiveness for us depends on our forgiveness of others. Jesus said something to the effect that if our gift is to mean anything at the altar we must first go and be reconciled with another. He taught us a two-edged prayer asking God to forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have sinned against us. God’s forgiveness depending on our forgiveness, sometimes the thought of that makes me shudder.

Dear friends in Christ, with all this in mind, this morning, somewhat tongue in cheek for I am not Moses, I want to share with you what I will call the Ten Commandments of Forgiveness. You will not, and need not, remember them all, don’t even attempt it. Recall, perhaps, just the ones that strike a chord with you. So, here are the Ten Commandments of Forgiveness. My pre-Christmas, Advent gift to you.

The First Commandment. Forgiveness is not easy. There is no cheap grace. There is no quick fix. A mother says to her child, “Tell him you’re sorry” ... “I’m sorry,” the kid mumbles reluctantly. Doesn’t mean a thing. If it’s quick and easy it’s not real, especially for deep betrayals and hurts. So we need to ask God for help. We can’t forgive on our own. Maybe, like Jesus who said to his Father, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,” we need to ask God to start the process of forgiveness. First Commandment. Forgiveness is not easy. It takes time.

The Second Commandment. Forgiveness is not forgetting. We say “forgive and forget.” I don’t think so. Forgiveness is about a change of heart, not a bad memory or having a senior moment. The wounds are too fresh too deep. While forgiveness may not include harboring festering hurts, neither is it about forgetting. In fact, it may be helpful to remember the point from which you have moved on, the occasion that began your journey to full forgiveness.

The Third Commandment. Forgiveness does not overlook evil. It doesn’t mean that we accept injustice or naively make believe that all is well when it isn’t. It doesn’t mean denial. It doesn’t mean, “Let’s pretend it never existed.” So number three is: Forgiveness does not overlook evil. Very important to remember.

The Fourth Commandment. Forgiveness is not indifference. What this means is where things are harmful and wrong, we don’t just go back to “business as usual” and let the hurt and damage go on. Forgiveness is not indifference, and we should do what we can to make sure the evil won’t happen again.

The Fifth Commandment. Forgiveness is not the same thing as approval. We can be forgiving and, at the same time, express our disagreement, express our disapproval of harmful behaviour.

O.K. friends. That's the first five. I'm going faster than Moses did.

Forgiveness is not easy.

Forgiveness is not forgetting.

Forgiveness does not overlook evil.

Forgiveness is not indifference.

Forgiveness is not the same thing as approval.

Here are the next five. In many ways, they are deeper and more positive.

The Sixth Commandment. Forgiveness is based on recognizing and admitting that people are always bigger than their faults. People are always larger than, and they are more than, their mistakes or their wrongdoings. In other words, we don't define somebody and who they are by something they said to us or the way they hurt us. They are bigger than that. Forgiveness is based on recognizing and admitting that people are always bigger and more than their faults and mistakes.

The Seventh Commandment. Forgiveness is willing to allow a person who has offended us to start over again. You know, the more common thing is saying, "Never again! No way! I will never let that happen again. I will never have anything to do with him again. No way!" Forgiveness means letting go of that. Forgiveness means allowing a person to start all over again.

The Eighth Commandment. Forgiveness recognizes the humanity of the person who has wronged us and also recognizes our own humanity and our shortcomings and...contributions to what went wrong.

The Ninth Commandment. Forgiveness surrenders the right to get even. It's not Eliza Doolittle's, "Just you wait, 'enry 'iggins, just you wait!" or "Boy! I'm going to get you back...Payback time!... Revenge! Or, at least, "Someday you'll be sorry." It means letting go of that and embracing the Christian truth that forgiveness surrenders the right to get even.

And, finally, the Tenth Commandment. Forgiveness means we wish the person who hurt us, or the group that hurt us, we wish them well. In fact, we wish them the best. And, that's tough, but it's basically letting God be the judge. We wish them well. We commend them to God's mercy, the same mercy that God offers us.

So there you have it, my friends, my Ten Commandments of Forgiveness. For what their worth, my Advent gift for you to mull over. Which ones resonate with you?

1. Forgiveness is not easy.
2. Forgiveness is not forgetting.
3. Forgiveness does not overlook evil.
4. Forgiveness is not indifference.
5. Forgiveness is not the same thing as approval.
6. Forgiveness recognizes that people are always bigger than their faults.
7. Forgiveness allows a person to start all over again.
8. Forgiveness recognizes the humanity of the wrongdoer.
9. Forgiveness surrenders the right to get even.
10. Forgiveness wishes the offender well.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. The gospel starts off with the desire for God's forgiveness at Advent and ends with Jesus bestowing it at Easter. In between, as a necessary connection, lies our own acts of forgiveness. You can't always have the bookends without the middle. Something to think about. AMEN.