

Sermon
15 Pentecost—Proper 19-A-2
St. Andrew's, Methuen
September 13, 2020
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Genesis 50:15-21
Psalm 103:8-13
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

I've never won the lottery—but in a way, that is what happens to the servant in Jesus's parable. He starts the day with a soul-crushing \$60 million (ten thousand talents) debt. But by midmorning his debt is zero. He's just been freely given \$60 million from the goodness of his Master's heart. You'd think he would celebrate with all his friends and hand out hundred-dollar bills as party favors.

Yet, by noon he is unwilling to forgive \$200 (100 denarii) owed by a fellow servant.

Jesus presents this parable in order to help Peter and all of us to understand why he is to forgive not 7 times, but 77 times. Since we've all been forgiven \$60 million, we should find it in our hearts to repeatedly forgive the \$200 our neighbor owes us.

Yet, we often don't.
Why?

The problem is we either don't realize or remember that we've received such a huge blessing. Instead, we start each day unconscious to the amazing grace we receive through Jesus Christ. We may even start thinking we're a lot better than those people over there.

So, my question is: how do we avoid slipping into either ignorance or forgetfulness of this enormous lottery of forgiveness we have won in Christ?

One suggestion we hear is that we should focus every day on our sinfulness. We are told to remember our sins and how bad we are. **By itself this self-criticism is not a healthy spiritual practice.** Just as constant criticism destroys the soul of a child or a dog, so too self-criticism hurts our soul, because it keeps us focused on the worst parts of ourselves.

A better suggestion is to focus on who we are in Christ, who wins forgiveness for us, no matter how far we have fallen short of the glory of God.

But here's the thing: we will forget what Christ has done for us, unless we are in the habit of confessing our sins and experiencing God's radical forgiveness.

When we confess our sins—either while alone, in the cave of the heart, or during General Confession in church—**do we actually practice believing God has forgiven us?**

And then do we allow ourselves to experience the joy of such a gift?

I know how easy it is for my confessions to become rote and empty, so that I leave worship with the same sins I walked in with. Therefore, I will experience neither forgiveness nor joy. **I will leave my lottery winnings on the table. So, it is important to be spiritually alert at the time of confession and to take the time to remember what God has done for us in Christ.**

AT Happening, which is Cursillo for teens, the kids write their sins on flash paper and after their corporate confession and absolution as each drops their list into a fire it instantly vanishes.

This is how it really is, though sometimes we get so attached to our guilt we can't imagine letting it go.

All these struggles with experiencing God's forgiveness point to why the Book of Common Prayer has a liturgy on page 447 called "The Reconciliation of a Penitent", commonly known as sacramental confession.

As I hope you know, the Episcopal Church has a flexible teaching on sacramental confession: the catch phrase is: **"all may, some should, none must."**

All may. All may go to a priest and make a confession—anytime, anywhere.

Some should. Some should make a private confession, because neither their private prayers nor the General Confession at church are providing them any relief for their troubled conscience. I've certainly had times I confess a sin and it floats up, hits the ceiling, and falls back onto me.

It's like trying to remove oil-based paint from our hands with just soap and water. It doesn't work: sometimes something else is needed to convince our souls that our forgiveness is real.

I felt such a need shortly after I was ordained and serving as the Vicar of a new mission called Saint Andrew's-in-the-Pines, Peachtree City,

Georgia, about 20 miles south of the Atlanta airport. I didn't want to make my confession to a fellow priest in the diocese of Atlanta, so I called Holy Spirit Monastery, east of Atlanta, which is run by Roman Catholic Trappist monks.

Providentially, the monk who answered my call said he would be glad to hear my confession. In preparation I wrote out my sins on multiple pages of a legal pad and showed up for my appointment, not knowing what to expect. We met in a small conference room in the quest house, and Father Tom Francis listened to my confession, offered counsel, and then put his hand on my head and pronounced absolution for my sins.

What I remember the most is the touch of his hand on my head. I experienced God's forgiveness in that moment as concrete and real.

All may. Some Should.

And finally---**None must.** No one is required to make a confession to a priest. It is a ministry that is available only to those who want it.

All may, some should, none must.

Yet all of us must find some way of confessing our sins to God that brings us the experience of forgiveness.

A young woman who was tortured by her sins at 3am every morning was counseled by Protestant reformer Martin Luther to ignore her thinking and instead to practice her faith by focusing her attention on Jesus on the cross—**for that is where all sins go to die.**

When we have trouble believing this good news, let's remember what Christ says from the cross: "Father forgive them, they know not what they do". Or what he says to the woman taken in adultery: "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." Or when he says, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Mark 2:17

Through faith we may experience the relief of having a debt forgiven that we can never repay. As we receive this gift we become free: **free from the guilt of the past, free to make restitution in the present, free to avoid that sin in the future.**

Free at last, free at last, great God almighty, we are free at last!

Let's let this sink in every morning and evening: In Christ our sins are forgiven: as Psalm 103:12 tells us: **"As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our sins from us."**

Then as we experience Christ's forgiveness a deep well of gratitude is created out of which flows forgiveness toward others.

N. T. Wright puts it: “**Every time you forgive someone...you pass on a drop of water out of the bucketful that God has already given you.**” Matthew for Everyone: Part Two, page 39

The way to improve our ability to forgive others, resides in our experience of Christ winning for us the \$60 million lottery of forgiveness. Out of the fullness of our heart, comes the desire to share the wealth won for us by Christ.