

Advent Midweek Vespers – 2021
The Incarnation and Your Neighbor
(The Incarnation and a Forgiving Spirit)
Matthew 18:21-35
Luke 7:36-50

I tried to be a good father. It sounds like I'm admitting failure. I'm not. To be sure, I wasn't perfect but let's not go into that. And I'm still a dad. My children are 22, 26, and 30 years old. Most of life's basic lessons I am not teaching anymore. For our purposes tonight, one lesson stands out in my mind. My daughter, the eldest, was three-ish. She was adorable, precocious, and strong-willed. That "strong-willed" part is not a synonym for "difficult." She simply had a self-confidence that most 3-year-olds don't have. She was wonderful. I tried to be a good dad. One of the things the good lady wife and I tried to teach her was when and how to apologize.

I was the vicar at Trinity Lutheran Church in Palo Alto, working with the super-sophisticated Stanford University students. On one occasion, Madison Joy, my daughter, did something for which an apology was appropriate and none was forthcoming. It seemed like a pretty straightforward teaching moment to me. The words just came tumbling out of my mouth: "Say 'you're sorry.'" The Stanford crew witnessed all this and some of them were taken aback. A philosophical discussion ensued. "What if she's not sorry?" "Are you telling her how to feel?" Those were just some of the questions they posed. Alise and I were more "down-to-earth" people and we thought that the basic idea of acknowledging it when we hurt someone and expressing regret was something our children ought to learn. I suspect that most of y'all agree. I tried to be a good father. Looking back on it, there is something more important to that lesson that may have received short shrift. Can you guess what it is? At least as important as how to apologize is what? How to forgive.

How many of y'all think that you know how to forgive? Let's put it another way. How many y'all have ever had someone hold forgiveness over your head? Have you ever had someone make you earn their forgiveness? Do you think that that *is* forgiveness? "I guess that I'll forgive you but you darn well better *appreciate* it!" "Do you remember that time I forgave you? Well, you just better make sure that I don't regret it!" We keep each other in the dog house all the time. Husbands and wives are brilliant at it. "Unless you kiss my feet, ain't no way I'm gonna forgive you." There's something deeply twisted about that.

Christmas is coming. The birth of our Lord is a celebration unlike any other. It's a mystery that stirs the heart. Almighty God is in that vulnerable baby. The One who hung the planets, who created the Rhino and the rose, who carved Mount Everest and the Marianna Trench; "with milk was fed the Lord of all who feeds the ravens when they call." God Himself becomes visible. His glory, hidden. His power, laid aside. His majesty cloaked beneath a servant's form. All of that is very present in this infant. God comes to us. He has an agenda, a mission, a task to complete. Christmas is coming. A boatload of people celebrate this holiday. How many know what they are celebrating? How many care? We are celebrating the birth of the King who dies on a wretched cross. That is His agenda. We celebrate the birth of God's Son who has come to win a forgiveness that every man, woman, and child needs.

Christmas is a joyful celebration of forgiveness which is God's lavish gift to sinners. What do we celebrate? We celebrate blood and hope; heaven and resurrection; life and love and truth and forgiveness; the one who doesn't know how to forgive doesn't understand Christmas. Here's the truth – we are poor forgivers. Those two readings we had a moment ago – those readings are a window in our lives, our fellow man, and the cultural Christmas that is around us. The first chap – he racked up a debt to the king that was astronomical. Seven life-times of labor couldn't accumulate the money needed to pay back the debt. He begged for patience, promising the king that he would pay the entire sum. In mercy, the king forgave the debt. Entirely! No required "thank you note," no kissing of the ring, no demand to come back and scrub the king's toilet every Monday. Just forgiveness... of a bajillion dollars! *That* is God forgiving you. All your sins, covered by God's mercy. Lust and greed and deceit and pride and thieving your friend's name by your gossip – all paid by that baby, lying in that manger. All paid by the Christmas Child who hangs on a cross. Forgiven.

And that scoundrel goes out and throttles his fellow man for five bucks. It's not about money. It's about forgiveness. It's about you and your fellow man. It's about Christmas being more than ribbons, more than tags, more than packages, boxes, and bags. Do we know what we are celebrating? Do we know how to forgive? You can't stop water from being wet. You can't stop fire from being hot. You can't stop Christmas from being about forgiveness, full and free.

The second reading speaks of a woman who treasures Christmas. She's different from the other fellow. She has likely welcomed men into her embrace for money. Do you know what it is like to feel alienated from God? Do you know what it is like to feel unholy and forgotten, to feel like a person that both man and God would simply throw away? Look what she does. She falls, weeping, at Christ's feet. As though no one else is on the planet, she lets down her hair and wipes His feet, kissing them, anointing them. Why? Because God does *not* throw her away. God would never throw her away. That Man, that Savior, He forgives her, bleeds and dies for her, gives her His holiness, restores her to the Father. Her debt was cancelled. Her huge debt was cancelled. Jesus puts it succinctly. He who has been forgiven little loves little. Not a single one of us has been forgiven little. She loved much and a woman like her knows two things: She knows what we celebrate at Christmas and she knows how to forgive.

It's Christ who teaches us how to forgive. We learn by receiving what He joyfully gives. You don't deserve it, you haven't earned it, you could never repay it – but Christ brings to you a forgiveness that is so thorough that not a single sin remains on your ledger (and you've done some pretty horrific things). As blood poured from His wounds, as life was leaving His holy body, Christ the King cried out to the Almighty for those who crucified Him: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). It's *sins* that are paid for. It's *sins* that Christ dies for. It's *sins* that He forgives. No one else but He can accomplish it for you. And He calls you to participate in His life. Participate! Christmas comes plowing into your soul. His love animates your heart and mind. He makes you bigger than what you are by nature. He makes you richer in His life than you could ever hope to be. By faith, you become a participant in His life and you have the privilege to reflect His beauty... as you forgive. His forgiving Spirit is in you. Christ shares His life with you. Followers of Christ, those who understand Christmas, forgive people who don't deserve it, people who haven't earned it, many of whom won't return the gesture, the love when you fail.

I'm still learning how to forgive. I hope that He keeps teaching me. I don't want to be a poor forgiver. I don't want to love little. I have not been forgiven little. I'm pretty sure that you are exactly like me. Christmas calls to us. With a beauty that transcends anything this world has to offer, Christmas calls to us. May we see, taste, and inwardly digest the beauty that Christmas brings, the forgiveness of God. May we reflect that beauty. May we teach our children that beauty. May all of us flourish beneath His love, His presence, and His grace.