

Trinity 22

I once had a secretary who said: Putting two women in the same room is like putting two tom cats in a croaker's sack . . .before long you are going to have a fight on your hands.

I am not so sure that it is *just* woman who are prone to conflict. It's common, I dare say, with both sexes.

Disagreements, quarrels, resentments, slights and snubs can be found wherever humans congregate . . . in the workplace, in families, in clubs and yes sadly at times in churches.

This morning, we came from a variety of backgrounds.

Some of you are in paid employment or have been in the past. You know that 'falling outs' occur in the workplace. You've seen it.

Some of you serve or have served on a board, perhaps of a homeowners' association or a civic organization. If you have, you may well have encountered tempers flaring and the people taking sides . . . normally nice people becoming monsters.

Some of you have gone through rocky times in family situations. You have experienced hurt and rejection. You have seen communication close down and walls go up.

Some of you may have been in churches where the same thing took place, often over the pettiest of matters.

Several weeks ago, I was talking to our piano tuner. He had told me earlier where he and his family go to church. It's located on the highway going from Ellijay to Dawsonville.

Out of curiosity, I ask why there was a Baptist Church across the road from his Baptist church. His response:

“Over 50 years ago, one faction fell out with another faction over when to hold services. When the losers did not get their way, they pulled out and build their own church.” ///

All of which to say there is plenty of opportunity to practice forgiveness.

Forgiveness, as you probably know, is hard work.

C.S. Lewis has a great quote on the subject: **“We all agree forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we have to practice it.”**

Hard or not, we must practice it. Holding onto resentment, hate and unforgiveness is

harmful to our spiritual health. Jesus tells us as much in today's Gospel.

The good news is: What God demands, God provides the resources for. The Holy Spirit enables us to do what otherwise would be impossible.

H.W. Dobson in his book *The Christian Year* tells the story of a black girl who became a Christian during a mission. Afterwards she said: **“Through this mission I have found the love of Jesus Christ – and He has made me able to forgive the man who murdered my father.”**

The same power that enabled her to forgive her father's murder is available to you and me.

At this point you might be asking, what if the other party is not interested in forgiveness, doesn't ask for it, and remains hostile? Do we still have to forgive?

I think my answer would have to be, yes, if you mean by forgiveness giving up hate and resentment and handing over the whole unholy mess over to God.

Forgiveness, you see, is not the same as reconciliation. Reconciliation involves the coming together of two parties, forgiveness extended and received. Yet, we all know that that does not always take place.

Even so, we can do our part. We don't have to let hate and resentment fester and destroy us.

I very much like Paul's words in Romans 12:18: **"If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men."**

Jesus' words on forgiveness in today's Gospel follow a question put to Him by Peter: **"Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?"**

Peter suggests seven times. He probably thought he was being generous. After all, the stock answer given by the rabbis was three.

To his surprise, Jesus says: **No, Peter, not seven, but seventy time seven, or 490 times.** In effect, He was saying that there should be no limit on forgiveness because that is the way it is with God.

The Almighty does not hand out His grace in carefully measured out increments but extends it richly and without limit. So should it be with us.

Jesus, however, does not leave the matter there. He does what preachers are wont to do, tells a story to drive His point home.

This story might be viewed as a drama in three acts under the headings: **Forgiveness extended, Forgiveness denied and Forgiveness rescinded.** Let's look at each.

In the first act – Forgiveness extended – a king is the doer of the action.

The receiver is a man who held a high position the king’s service. This man grossly misused his position, and, in due time, it was revealed that he owed the king a huge debt, one larger than anyone could pay.

At this point, there was only one thing this disgraced servant could do, throw himself on the mercy of the king, and that is what he did.

In response, the king does the unthinkable. He takes the loss upon Himself and forgives the debt.

Of course, the king’s act is a picture of what God does for us.

We are not able settle our account on our own. In the words of the General Confession in the Prayer Book: **“There is no health in us.”**

Yet the good news, the Gospel, is that God's property is always to have mercy.

In fact, He comes seeking us before we seek Him. **“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,”** says St. Paul in Romans 5:8.

What we could not do for ourselves – settle the old account – God has done for us by sending His Son to be our substitute and sin bearer . . . to pay the debt we could not pay.

That's wonderful news. To quote a hymn from the American Gospel tradition:

*Grace, grace, God's grace
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within
Grace, grace, God's grace
Grace that is greater than all our sin.*

Perhaps you find yourself this morning bowled over by the mistakes of the past. You

know you have not lived up to your own standards let alone God's. You desire peace, forgiveness and a new start.

If that is you . . .wait no longer. Jesus stands with His arms wide open, beckoning you to come. Walk into His embrace. Receive His mercy. Don't be bound by the past. Go free.

This past week I was speaking to a lady at a nursing home who is terminable ill. She said she had tried to be a good person and hoped God would receive her.

I explained to her the concept of grace . . . Jesus paid our debt. Receiving not achieving is the way into God's Kingdom.

God's grace would be a great place to end this sermon, but there are two more acts in this drama. We've looked at Forgiveness extended, let's turn now to **Forgiveness denied.**

In this second act, the unimaginable happens. The forgiven man goes out and finds a man who owes him a paltry sum and demands that the debt be paid in full. He turns a deaf ear to the man's cries for mercy and has him packed off to jail.

We are left shaking our heads in disbelief. Yet, what is pictured here is all too common. This is the person who hangs onto grudges, nurses wounds and refuses to forgive.

Indeed, if we look long enough, we might well discover ourselves in this man.

Is there anyone against whom you are harboring anything like an unforgiving spirit this morning? If so, consider what God's has done for you and give it up.

A Christian writer by the name of Erick Raymond has said: **“Choosing to hold a grudge is tremendously powerful, controlling**

others and you. Forgiving is even more powerful, liberating others and you.”

So far, we have looked at Act 1: Forgiveness extended and Act 2: Forgiveness denied. Let's move now to Act 3: **Forgiveness rescinded.** And this is the scary section.

The king gets wind of what the man he had forgiven had done to his fellow servant. In response, he withdraws his edict of pardon and has him thrown in jail.

In this act, we see the effect of unforgiveness. It puts us back into bondage. It robs us of our freedom. It has consequences, perhaps eternal ones.

The message here might well be: **Beware of being a false recipient of grace. Make your election sure. Be the genuine article. Become yourself a vehicle of grace.**

Grace is wonderful. If a preacher had but one sermon to preach it would have to be on the free mercy of God, but this mercy must not be presumed upon or trifled with.

As I close, let me say there is a **missional** aspect to forgiveness. When the world sees Christians doing what the black girl I told about earlier doing, forgiving the unforgivable, they are bound to take note. Some may even be moved to enquire further and want to come into the Christian fellowship.

Christians are called to be a *peculiar* people, by 'peculiar' I mean radically different. ///

You can't get more peculiar than this.