

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia on Sunday September 14<sup>th</sup> 2008 by the  
Reverend Alan Neale  
“Forgive... and Forget?”**

What is it that is likely to lower blood pressure, build a stronger immune system and cause stress hormones to be reduced in the blood? What is it that will ease back pain, stomach problems and headaches? And, finally, what is it that will reduce anger, bitterness, resentment, depression and other negative emotions? What is it?

Well, medical studies (as published on WebMD) indicate that all these good things, all these desirable goals, are more easily achieved when we ... forgive, when we are forgiving people!

**Forgiveness - this is the message of Christ!** Over the centuries there have been many suggestions as to what is the authentic, quintessential, unique message of Christ. Is it “Abba, Father?” – clearly an important element of Jesus’ teaching, but not unmentioned in Hebrew Scriptures before Jesus. Is it “the kingdom of God” – again, a concept often on the lips of our Saviour but also not unmentioned in Hebrew Scriptures. But... when you come to the concept of forgiveness (and especially the forgiveness of one’s enemies)... oh then, you begin to encroach upon new, spiritually potent and vibrant ground. “At that point Peter got up the nerve to ask, “Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?” Jesus replied, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven”!

**Forgiveness – this is the message of the Church!** Today, and on recent Sundays, we have heard Paul giving charge after charge to the Christian community in Rome. As Diana said two weeks ago – these chapters are “packed with great one-liners” and, if I may be so bold as to adapt a phrase from her sermon, these chapters (addressed to the Christian community) could be called “The Life of the Church... for dummies”.

Forgiveness... this is not a peripheral activity for select church members... this is no optional course for which we enroll if we feel so inclined... this is not one item for which we opt on some smorgasbord of church activities... no, this defines the church... this distinguishes from other well-intentioned communities... by this we experience and express the power of God in Christ to forgive, to set free, to release. Paul, the great strategist for the Gospel, knew that if the Christian community in Rome (at the centre of things, at the hub of the Empire) could get this right... it would have the most amazing impact and reverberations. Shouldn’t we here in Philadelphia have a similar concern?!

And even (should I really say that?), and even our Prayer Book strongly, boldly, daringly recognizes the crucial importance of forgiveness in the Christian community. Please turn to page 409 in your Prayer Book (yes, that’s the red book in front of you in the pew)... “When the priest sees that there is hatred between members of the congregation, *he* shall speak privately to them, telling them that they may not receive Communion until they have forgiven each other. And if the person or persons on one side truly forgive the others and desire and promise to make up for their faults, but those on the other side refuse to forgive, the priest shall allow those who are penitent to come to Communion, but not those who are stubborn” – wow! . “At that point Peter got up the nerve to ask, “Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?” Jesus replied, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven”!

**Oh... and forgiveness – this is the message of those in love!** Before weddings, here at least, the groom and best man are led to the parish house where the groom may have some opportunity to calm down, to focus, to reflect on what is about to happen; the bride is ushered into the bride’s room away from the busyness of the narthex and entrance. One incidental advantage of this is that they saved from the avalanche of gratuitous advice that would otherwise be proffered to them by, hopefully, well-intentioned guests. But if you had the opportunity to offer one word, one phrase of advice to the couple... what would it be? (And “don’t do it” is not allowed!). What would it be? Forgive and accept forgiveness!

Listen to this beautifully succinct and powerful prayer added in 1979 “Give them grace, when they hurt each other, to recognize and acknowledge their fault and to seek each other’s forgiveness and yours. Amen” – give them grace when (not if) they hurt each other... to acknowledge their fault and to seek each other’s forgiveness and yours”. “At that point Peter got up the nerve to ask, "Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?" Jesus replied, "Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven”!

Forgiveness... the message of Christ, the message of the Church, and the message of those in love.

But, I have been pondering this week... and actually stopping church members and asking their opinion... but should this message of “forgiveness” be enlarged so as to read “Forgive... and forget”? Is “Forgive and Forget” an authentically Christian message based upon a Christian/Biblical understanding of God and Man... or is it some quaint piece of folk-lore, some urban legend, that has weaseled its way into authentic Christian teaching... I think the latter!

As I read today’s Gospel passage from Matthew 18, I see clearly (how can you miss it... but some will!), I see clearly the call, the charge, the example to forgive... but not to forgive and forget.

Lord Harold Wilson (once Prime Minister, and leader of the Labour Party, in England) once told a friend, “Tell my political opponents that I have buried the hatchet but tell them also that I know where I have buried it”. For him, there was forgiveness but, apparently, not forgetting!

Those who forgive need not, should not, forget what has happened, what they have done. The master who so generously, spontaneously, forgave all the debt of his servant clearly had not forgotten his act for when other servants brought a detailed report to the king... he immediately remembers what had happened. The person who is continually abused (in any way) at some point by the grace of God may be given power to forgive... but it is surely unwise to forget. And surely simply not possible unless there is some frontal lobotomy which, as far as I know, is not even made possible by a formal confession to a priest! When someone has been maligned, abused, hit often by some metaphorical two by four – do not be surprised if, when they hear a “whooshing” noise behind them... they duck for cover. This is not evidence of lack of forgiveness, this is not paranoia... this is God-given common sense.

And those who have been forgiven must not, should not, forget what has happened, what they have received. Isn’t it the lack of memory, isn’t it the lack of gratitude which makes the forgiven servant so unforgiving? If only he had said, “Thank you” and practiced gratitude! If only he had remembered that for which he had been forgiven, that from which he had been set free! “Bless the Lord and forget not all His benefits.”

At yesterday’s wedding I mentioned a little incident that occurred at the rehearsal. When we came to practice the vows, I prepared the groom to speak after me... I began, but he was silent. His dear bride looked at him... shook his hands and said, “Go”... and he did! I told the couple, at the end of the homily, that God was saying to them, “Go... go love, go accept, go forgive each other” and, the great news, God will give them the power to do what He asks of them.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, today God says to you (and me) “Go forgive... accept forgiveness” and do this in the Name of Christ and in the Power of His Spirit. Amen!