

*Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 11.ix.2005, 10:30 a.m.  
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Chanceford Twp., York Co.,  
Pennsylvania  
Ante-Communion liturgy, LBW Setting 2  
Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 103:1-13; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35*

**J. J. !**

Grace to you and peace, from Him Who is and Who was and  
Who is to come! ? Amen.

*"Should you not have had mercy on your  
fellow slave,  
as I had mercy on you?"*

*--Matthew 18:33*

In today's Gospel, the question of forgiveness within the Church is posed to Jesus by Peter, on whose rock-solid faith the Church is founded. We can only wonder at the context of this question. Perhaps tension was already growing between some of the Twelve, particularly between Judas and the others. Perhaps there had been a falling out between Peter and some of those many other Disciples who would fall away from the following of Christ as Our Lord approached Calvary. I doubt that Peter would have asked this question had he not found it difficult to forgive someone within the

fellowship of the Disciples. Jesus reminds Peter, the community of Saint Matthew and us that, within the community of faith, there is no limit on God's forgiveness toward us for Jesus' sake. Likewise, there should be no limit on our forgiveness toward others within that same community of faith, hope and love. Where we offend one another, where we relinquish our rights as the world might see them in order to forgive one another and to be forgiven, there is no statute of limitations.

But, on this September the 11<sup>th</sup>, four years after the outrages of this date against our nation and its people, another question comes to mind. Are we bound also to forgive those who planned the attacks against us and those who plan outrages yet to be attempted? Does the love of God we have received through no merit of our own also impel us to forgive those who do not want our forgiveness, those who regard us, precisely as Christians, not as persons,

not as children of God, but as something lower than animals, as 'infidels,' as obstacles to their plan to establish a world-wide Muslim society and state? It would seem to make about as much sense to forgive Osama bin Laden and his co-belligerents as it would to forgive Hurricane Katrina for the mass death she caused, also completely indifferent to the lost lives of the dead and the suffering of the living.

As Peter Lombard wrote in his manual of theology back in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, '*Sic et non*', "Yes and no." Yes, God's love for us in Jesus Christ does free us from eternal bondage to bitterness and the desire for revenge after an outrage has been committed, destructive desires that cannot be fulfilled. It would also make as much sense to let our personal lives, our souls be guided by the demand for retribution toward terrorists or a toward a conventional foreign enemy as it would to refuse to forgive Hurricane Katrina or the forces of nature that spawned her. A U. S.

Marine sharpshooter was recently asked by a radio interviewer what he felt toward the individual enemy soldiers or other combatants he was ordered to kill before and after he carried out his assignment. His answer was in two parts. First, he said, a sharpshooter is called in because military or civilian lives are being threatened by an enemy. At that point, the Marine explained, he had trained himself to think of the enemy only as a target to be eliminated, just as that enemy would do to him if he were spotted. After the enemy gun or mortar or rocket launcher had been silenced, *then* the Marine had also trained himself to remember that it was not a target but *a man* who had just died, someone who would not be going home, someone whose death would be grieved. In that way the Marine sought to prevent himself from becoming one who simply writes others off as zeros, from becoming a slave to the same ideology that drives the enemy. In a couple of very happy instances, he had gone in to inspect

the enemy position he had fired on to discover that his enemy had only been wounded. In those cases the Marine sharpshooter had assisted with first aid and with getting the man he had just shot back to an aid station. In other words, the instant the enemy had ceased to be a *threat* to both friendly forces and defenseless civilians, he had also ceased to be an *enemy*. This is not only a humane attitude, consistent with a Christian attitude toward all people created in the image of God, but it is also the principle governing the humane treatment of prisoners of war. To have not regarded him as an enemy before that point, however, would be to have placed the lives of many and one's own life in jeopardy. The atrocities committed by violent hearts and hands at the New Orleans Convention Center against the defenseless these past days show what happens when real enemies are not dealt with as such.

Another example of the important distinction between self-defense and forgiveness is in the area of domestic violence. For generations and even centuries, Christian wives were counseled by the Church to submit to the ill-treatment of their husbands on the basis of the sanctity of marriage and on the basis of Our Lord's saying about our attitude of unlimited forgiveness toward those who offend us within the Church. But, as soon as the routine subjugation of women was seen in society and Church as beneath human dignity and as falling far short of the will of God and the intention of marriage, that counsel has changed. The spouse—usually, but not always, the wife—who is beaten, verbally and psychologically abused must take steps necessary for her own survival. In taking those steps, whether it means moving to a shelter, taking refuge with a friend or relative or calling the police to remove the violent spouse from the home, it becomes in that moment necessary to set aside the

bond of affection and understanding that held that marriage together. Now, survival of the wife and children is paramount. After the conditions for that survival have been restored through a secure separation, and only *then*, wise judgment based also on the desire for reconciliation based on forgiveness can be exercised. The spouse who suffered the offense can then live free from bitterness by forgiving the abusing spouse, whether the path that is then chosen leads to genuine repentance, deeper mutual understanding and a restoration of the marriage or to its permanent dissolution in divorce.

Whether dealing with the brother or sister within the community of faith who offends through force of habit or insensitivity, or with the outright foe to whom our own life and feelings are matters of indifference, we should always bear in mind just how we have collectively treated *God* , Who alone has a sovereign claim to all our love, devotion

and fidelity. The Elizabethan poet, parson and later bishop, John Donne, compared God's offense and God's love to that of a man whose goods have been stolen and who must then either lose them forever or buy them back from the very thief who stole them. I will close with Donne's "Holy Sonnet XV":

*Wilt thou love God as he thee! Then digest,  
My Soule, this wholesome meditation,  
How God the Spirit, by Angels waited on  
In heaven, doth make his Temple in thy brest,  
The Father having begot a Son most blest,  
And still begetting, (for he ne'r begonne)  
Hath deigned to chuse thee by adoption,  
Coheire to 'his glory,' and Sabbaths endless rest;  
And as a robb'd man, which by search doth finde  
His stolne stuffe sold, must lose or buy 'it againe:  
The Sonne of glory came downe, and was slaine,  
Us whom he'had made, and Satan stolne, to*

*unbinde.*

*'Twas much, that man was made like God before,  
But, that God should be made like man, much more.*

? Amen.

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Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to our God

and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father  
and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. ? Amen.

***S. D. G. !***