

Trinity XIX Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

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Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.

What is it that is keeping you from walking? What is that is weighing you down? What burden is your crushing load? What cripples you, paralyzes you, confines you to your bed? Unforgiven sin. It holds us down and it keeps us there, even forever, if it can.

Unforgiven sin - this is our common human ball and chain. Our own sins are like chains, leg irons. We can barely walk with them, we fall constantly, they chafe and rub and burn, and the moment we have forgotten them, they trip us up again. These are our chains. And our ball, this crazy weight we drag along with us, under whose weight we will eventually drown, this too is unforgiven sin, the trespasses we have suffered and not yet forgiven.

Unforgiven sin, whether what we have committed or what we have suffered, this ball and chain, imprisons us in the past. We

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cannot live and walk in the present, crippled and imprisoned in our past. What we are talking about here is the crippling, the paralyzing power of guilt. Life, peace, happiness, stability, community, marriage, friendship - these are all destroyed by unforgiven sin. And it contributes to a hardness of heart, and we find ourselves caught in cycles of self-destructive behaviour, in endless spirals of sin. We become people of bitterness and wrath and anger, and clamor and slander and malice.

Have you never come face to face with this paralysis in your own life, with your own inability to walk as a Christian ought to walk, your own impotence to change your manner of life? You and I are that paralyzed man.

Sometimes when I go to the grocery store to get a jug of milk, I walk out with three or four other items. On a bad day, I walk out with the other items and forget to get the milk. I think retail people call this impulse buying. It's good for shops, but it's hard on

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marriages. Well, the people who brought this paralyzed man to Jesus must have felt much the same way. They came for healing but they left with something else, for Jesus saw deeper into this man and his needs. His paralysis was a sign, a symptom, like ours, of a deeper need for healing, for forgiveness. Jesus Christ did not come into the world to cure our symptoms, he came to save. Whether it is your drunkenness or anger, your lying or your stealing, these are but the symptoms of the hard heart, of guilt. So you and I come here today looking for this or that, but Jesus sees into our hearts and lives and gives us what we need most, the forgiveness of sins.

Now listen to how he proclaims it. First, he tells him that this is good news, encouragement, that he will give him: "Take heart, Be of good cheer." Then he addresses him as "Son," as if somehow now he has come to belong to the family of Jesus. And this is a special family, the family of those who sins have been forgiven. "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." This is the good news, that

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by Jesus Christ, who was born as one of us and died for all of us, we may become the forgiven children of God.

And this forgiveness, my friends, is liberating. Your sins are forgiven. You are not a prisoner of your past mistakes and faults. The burden of your guilt has been taken away by this man, who took it on himself. Now the dispute in the Gospel is about Jesus' authority to forgive. It is his of course, as we know, because he is the Son of God. And it is his because he is the one who has died himself for the sins of the whole world. As Son of God and Saviour of the world, this power is his.

This message is so liberating if we receive it and believe it, and in the power of that liberation, this man took up his bed and walked. This is reason to walk and leap and jump and run for joy. Crippling guilt is overcome, our chains are loosed and we are free. This is what the Gospel of forgiveness is all about. And it is in forgiveness that God's power is known and shown.

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Well so much for our chains...but what of that heavy ball we are dragging around? The Epistle addresses it. In a most wonderful way, St. Paul argues for the completeness of our Christian conversion. It is not enough merely to stop lying; we must become truth tellers. It is not merely a question of refraining from stealing; rather, we are to give to others. This is a common reading of the Ten Commandments, for example, that wherever one thing is forbidden, the corollary is that the opposite is enjoined. "Thou shalt not kill" means that we are to be in the life-saving and life-giving business. We must both put off and put on. Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor

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and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted. Finally, this means that it is not enough just to be forgiven, we must become forgiving. Forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. We are called then to allow the forgiving power of Jesus Christ flow through us. When we carry a grudge around, it hurts us more than anyone else. When we let the sun go down on our anger, we may find ourselves the ones without sleep. As Jesus shows his divinity and power supremely in forgiveness, so we prove ourselves the children of God by the Holy Spirit, when we forgive one another, as God in Christ and for Christ has forgiven us. In kindness, tender heartedness and forgiveness, God is known and glorified and honoured.

Now the flip side is, that we prove ourselves to be the servants of Satan and children of the devil, when we refuse to forgive. It is a

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terrible thing this side of unforgiven sin, and I am bound to warn you as strongly and sternly as possible. When we choose not to forgive, when we cling in any way to a hurt or grudge, we choose a world without reconciliation and forgiveness, and we call that world in one word, Hell. And we will go down with our precious dirty ball.

Forgiveness is a gift of God, the most expensive gift of him who was crucified, praying, “Father, forgive them.” And it is beyond us to forgive one another, but by this power God gives us through Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit.

This freedom and power of Jesus Christ, is the freedom and power that comes by and with forgiving love. We remember again and again that and how God in Christ has forgiven us, that we may learn thereby to forgive one another. In Jesus, we may know the power of forgiveness - the healing, liberating power of the forgiveness of our sins - and the strength to forgive one another. If you will not forgive, you are unworthy of the name of Christ. But

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when that kind of forgiveness - liberating, loving, forgiveness - is practiced among us in our homes and lives and in this congregation, people will see and marvel that God has given such power and authority to humans.

The message of today's readings is a call to stewardship, to the faithful stewardship of God's grace. The greatest gift is this gift of forgiveness. And the rule we must learn and live by, it's the same one, for it is the rule of grace - that first we must receive what God gives, but then we are bound to respond by his help. The rule of forgiveness for Christians is simply this, Freely ye have received, freely give.

So, my brothers and sisters, take heart, children of God, your sins are forgiven. So, be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Amen.