

"Forgiveness as Gift." – October 8, 2017
by Wayne J. Schneider – In Nomine Domine

Forgiveness as Gift St. Matthew 6:12-13

A friend of mine took his small grandson with him one day to run some errands. When lunch time arrived, the two of them went to a familiar cafe for a sandwich. The grandfather sat down on one of the stools at the counter and lifted the boy up to the seat beside him. They ordered lunch, and when the waiter brought the food, the grandfather said, "*Son, we'll just have a silent prayer.*" Grandpa got through praying first and waited for the boy to finish his prayer, but he just sat with his head bowed for an unusually long time. When he finally looked up, his grandfather asked him, "*What in the world were you praying about all that time?*" With the innocence and honesty of a child, he replied, "*How do I know? It was a silent prayer.*"

Whenever someone is touched by Jesus, change happens, transformation occurs. Grace is the 'free gift' of God, the unconditional love of God that Jesus lived and taught. The Hebrew word for grace is 'hesed,' translated in the Old Testament to mean "*loving kindness.*"

In the New Testament the Greek word "charis," 'grace', is referred to as God's "*unconditional love;*" this is one of St. Paul's favorite terms. He often opens or closes his letters to the churches with grace.

Our New Testament lesson for this morning is full of meaning and magnitude yet it contains both paradox, surprise, enigma and is scandalous. The concept of forgiveness is at once profound and wondrous. To battle the human penchant for hostility, resentment, and grudge-holding, then to proffer unconditional love is the mark of Christian character. The foundation of the Christian ethic and passion is forgiveness.

What is troublesome about verse 12 in our Gospel lesson, is the implication, seen more clearly in St. Luke's Gospel, that when we ask God to forgive our sin, we

have already forgiven those who have sinned against us. It is an “If-then” theology. It begs the question, “*Have we forgiven everyone and can we ever make that claim?*” In God’s usual fashion, we are forgiven without even holding up our end of the bargain.

In the Lord’s Prayer we prayer together in worship, is a lesson regarding the holy relationship that humankind has with God. It is a picture of the ideal Kingdom of God in the present and in the idyllic future. This is not a challenge-- forgiveness out of obligation; rather it is a matter of reciprocity. When our lives are lived in fulfillment of of the will of God, the forgiveness we offer is given back by the One who originated the gift.

Our focus is upon the grace of God but we must not ignore verse 13, which leads us to the end of the Lord’s Prayer on a note of unrest, asking God to not “*bring us to the time of trial.*” There is also a plea for safety from “the evil one.” Remembering the context of the first century, it seems to be speaking of the early believers fear of maltreatment.

This harassment would not be completely fulfilled until two centuries had passed when the Roman empire forced everyone to make offerings to Caesar. This prayer prepared the church for an uncertain future.

Unconditional love (grace) is seen as appropriate in situations, such as children who have terminal cancer or challenging physical or emotional conditions. The people who provide loving care and generous portions of unconditional love, are met with almost unanimous approval, and their actions are lauded. Most of us desire such loving care to be extended to God’s precious ones.

Expanding that this same grace to convicted felons, however, is another matter, some say. Violent criminals who have torn the fabric of the human society; who have murdered for little or no reason, appear to be unworthy of God’s, and our, love.

Jesus, as usual, goes against the world’s tide and displays a grace that includes everybody. The Gospel is not limited to those who live or believe is a

particular fashion, but is extended to all, including the desperate and unlikely sinners like you and me. In Jesus' final moments he stretches forgiveness to an offender who hangs crucified beside him. There is the personification of unconditional love and forgiveness.

The mission of the church of Christ is both an act of discipleship, following the example of Jesus in service and justice, and an illustration of God's redemption and grace. God's unconditional love renews this world whether or not we believe in God or accept God's grace. God's trust in us is not dependent upon our trust in God, and this defines Amazing Grace. Alleluia. Amen.