

## Lenten Penance Service

April 2, 2007

I'll bet that most of us here believe that if we are sincerely sorry for our sins – for what we've done wrong – that God has already forgiven us? So why are we here?... I think it's because we have that natural human need to hear those four words- those four powerful words: **YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN...** We pretty much heard those words in our 1<sup>st</sup> reading from 1 John: **"If we acknowledge our sins, God is faithful & just & will forgive our sins & cleanse us from every wrongdoing."** Did you hear what that said? If we confess our sins, God will forgive us & purify us – wipe the slate clean.

Can we trust this promise from Scripture that God will forgive our sins? ...You bet we can. That 1<sup>st</sup> reading said it very clearly: "God is faithful."...which means God is true to His word.... We see it again in the Letter to Hebrews (10:23): "The God who made the promises to you does not lie." ... And if that's not enough for us to trust in God's promise of forgiveness,... look up there, up at that cross...We know God can forgive our sins because Jesus died for them...He paid the price so that my sins, your sins, the sins of the world could be forgiven...He took all of our guilt on His shoulders to give you & me a fighting chance to get to heaven,...because on our own we would never be good enough to make it...Now I'll never understand why God loves me so much that He would do this for me...But I sure am glad He does. And I'll bet you are too....So as Fr. Wm often says, let's hear it for Jesus, let's give it up for our Savior.

So, we thank God & applaud God for offering us this magnificent gift of forgiveness...And how do we respond to God's generous gift?...Three things: **1st**, we have to CONFESS our sin...To receive God's forgiveness, I have to admit that I have sinned...not so much to God, because God already knows...I have to admit to myself that what I did was wrong...I can't be trying to convince myself that it wasn't that bad...Now I presume we are all here because we are ready to confess, to admit our sins... The **2<sup>nd</sup> thing** we have to do: We must promise God that we will do our best to REPENT...that is, stop the sinning, stop doing whatever it is we've been doing that is contrary to God's commandments. ...With God's help, with the strength & the graces we receive from the Sacraments –especially the Eucharist - we can change what God wants us to change...OK, we have to confess our sins & promise to repent. Then there's a **3rd thing** we must do in response to God's offer of forgiveness...and it can be a lot harder than the other two: *We must extend forgiveness to others.*

Admittedly, this is easier said than done...It is awfully hard to let go of the hurt that people have caused us...Like the lady from Providence, Rhode Island who put this on her husband's tombstone: *Rest In Peace...until I get there...*I guess some people are just going to be bitter to the end, & even beyond...But to Jesus forgiveness is a very serious business, so much so that He included it in the prayer He taught His disciples & us in today's Gospel. ...The prayer we call the Our Father, in which we pray ..."Forgive us our trespasses (our sins) as we forgive those who trespass (sin) against us." ...When you pray the Our Father, have you ever stopped to listen to what you're saying?...You're saying : "Lord if there is someone, anyone I haven't forgiven, then don't forgive me."...OUCH!! ...Now when Jesus taught His disciples this prayer, He wanted to make sure they understood this, so – as we heard in our Gospel reading – He followed it by saying: "If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do NOT forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you."

And if that wasn't clear enough, Jesus later tells the parable about a king who forgave his servant a very large debt...But then that forgiven servant refused to do the same for a man who owed him \$20 & couldn't pay....When the king found out, he was furious & sent that servant to prison until he could pay every dime....Jesus concluded the parable. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." ...So there it is, at least 3 times in the Bible,...God will not forgive OUR sins if we have not forgiven EVERYONE

who has sinned against us...Those are the scariest words in the Bible...Words we wish weren't there,...especially when we're just not ready to forgive... because someone has hurt us so deeply & won't even admit doing anything wrong...or they're not really sorry...Or they keep on offending us until we say: "That's it! After what they did, there's no way can I forgive them. ...They don't deserve my forgiveness!"...Sound familiar? Yet, Jesus says we have to forgive. It's not an option...unless we'd rather not have God forgive us.

Now before you get up & walk out because you're just not ready to forgive that blankety-blank so & so,...let me clear up some wrong thinking about forgiveness that can make it harder for us to forgive someone. **1<sup>st</sup> thing**, despite that old saying,...we **cannot** "forgive & forget."...I've forgiven people many times, but I still remember what it was they did...I'm not a computer; I can't delete it from my memory....Forgiveness has nothing to do with erasing the memory of what happened...It has to do with putting that memory into God's hands...& letting God heal the pain & anger & resentment associated with that memory...When we forgive, it is actually a gift from God because it frees us from being continually hurt by the memory of what happened...A recent health update in Readers Digest said that people who forgive past wrongs are more physically & mentally healthy, less depressed & less stressed out...You see, when you forgive, it doesn't make the other person right, it makes you free.

**2<sup>nd</sup> thing**. When you forgive someone, you're **NOT** excusing what they did...You're not saying, "Oh, it was an accident, you didn't mean to hurt me, it's not your fault, I don't hold you responsible."...If that were the case, you wouldn't need to forgive them...When you forgive someone, you're saying, "you hurt me intentionally, you knew what you were doing, you are responsible...but I forgive you."...When someone hurts us intentionally, we never excuse them from taking responsibility,... but we do forgive them.

**3<sup>rd</sup> thing**. Forgiveness is not tolerance... You do not have to tolerate what people do when you forgive them for doing it...There are a lot of things you cannot & should not tolerate. ..Here's an example...Say you're a school kid, & there's a bully who every day comes up to you & grabs you around the neck & says give me your lunch money...You might be able to go home that night & forgive him. ..But when you go to school the next day & the same bully is there & he wants your lunch money, do you just tolerate it again & again, & eventually by time you get to the 5th grade you're suffering from malnutrition...No, you get the ass't principal involved to stop what's happening...You forgive the bully, but you don't tolerate the situation...Same thing if you're in an abusive relationship...You can forgive the person, but you don't tolerate it...You get out of there or you call for help...Forgiveness is not the same as tolerance.

**4<sup>th</sup> thing**. You can forgive a person without restoring your relationship with them...You can forgive them even if you don't trust them & even if you think they'd hurt you again if they could...you can still forgive them, but that doesn't mean you put yourself right back in a place where they can hurt you...That doesn't mean you restore them to the place in your life that they held before...For example, if a man physically abuses his wife, & she has to move out to escape it, she can forgive him, but that doesn't mean she moves right back in....If your best friend hurts you deeply, & isn't the least bit sorry about it,...you can forgive her, but that doesn't require you to continue to spend a lot of time with that person....The fact is: forgiving someone does not entitle them to anything...just your forgiveness.

OK, so when we forgive, we are NOT forgetting, excusing, tolerating or restoring...What, then, are we doing when we forgive?... Well, the **1<sup>st</sup> thing** we do is give up our right to get even...to retaliate...We give that over to God...The bible says, "Revenge is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."..God's telling us, "Don't do it, it's my job." ...So we let God settle the score. We leave it in God's hands...The **2<sup>nd</sup> thing**..We don't care if the other person wants to hold onto a grudge. ...That's their problem...We forgive them & get on with our life, and get over the hurt...The **3<sup>rd</sup> thing** we do when we forgive someone is we pray for them...We pray that they will see how

they have hurt us & they will ask God to forgive them...We pray that they will be healed of whatever it was that made them do what they did.

Now maybe you're sitting there thinking, "That all sounds good, but I just can't do it!...I can't forgive that person." ...My friends, that's why we need Jesus Christ...St. Paul said it in Phil. 4:13:"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."... All things, includes even forgiving that person who doesn't deserve it...We need Christ's strength in our life...& He's only a prayer away...If you're having a hard time forgiving someone right now,... look up at that cross & call to mind all the people you need to forgive....*(long pause)* ...Now pray: Lord, I've come here seeking your forgiveness because I know that my sins have hurt you, have nailed you to that cross...I know you love me & want to forgive me, but I also know that it will be hard for you to do unless I first forgive those who have hurt me...They don't deserve my forgiveness, but then I don't deserve yours...Please, Lord, please give me the grace & the strength I need to forgive, to place it all on you...to give it all up to you...My Lord...My Savior. AMEN!