

The Creed Part 6 The Forgiveness of Sins

I often wonder why people do not attend church or have given up on church. Is it because churches focus on sin? Is it because the majority of Christian voices preoccupy themselves with pointing out the sins of others? Is it because people hold grudges that people won't let go? Or is it when a proposal is made, or someone takes a particular position, others take a stance, not on the basis of the value of what is being proposed or said, but instead on the basis of what that person has done to them and the grudges they still hold?

Last week, we dug into the phrase "the communion of saints," which has its roots in a time of persecution against the church, much like the concept of the forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sins emerged during a period of intense pressure when an order to destroy all copies of Scripture was issued. Christian leaders who refused to comply faced torture and death. These were indeed trying times. When the persecution ceased, those who had faltered under its threat sought reconciliation within the church. Yet, some protested, arguing that the church should remain holy and a witness to the truth of Christ. This journey from persecution to reconciliation is a powerful testament to the transformative power of forgiveness, showing that it can heal wounds and restore relationships.

It seems as if the dark side of the human heart loves to see others punished. We live in an age in which outrage is all the rage. News outlets, people, politics, and social media, Twitter and Facebook, are all obsessed with living in a punishment-obsessed world, so when a mistake is made in the public sphere, those involved seek to destroy a person's life. It's a fanning of the flame in anger and hate flying from a 30,000-foot view, losing all sight of people's lives. There are just some people who love joining the satisfying division, but for the people of God, this should not be so.

It's no coincidence that "the forgiveness of sins" is linked to the holy catholic church and the communion of saints. Now that we've established our connection to the universal church and the Triune God, what does this mean for our lives as we interact with one another? The Holy Spirit has united us as a people to demonstrate God's forgiveness to the world. Today, we'll explore what the Apostles Creed says about forgiveness, what Christians believe about forgiveness, and why it's crucial in our lives. This morning's discussion will underscore the importance of forgiveness in our lives as Christians, reminding us of our value and significance in the eyes of God and encouraging us to extend the same forgiveness to others.

As part of the church, we are empowered and responsible to promote forgiveness in our lives and the world, knowing that we are united in this mission as a larger community of believers. Our belief in forgiveness is a cornerstone of our faith, and it is what connects us to God and each other. Let us remember that forgiveness is the thread that binds us together, creating a solid and united community and making us feel connected and part of a larger community.

We should take a moment to pray. Gracious Father, you teach us to “let the peace that comes from Christ rule in our hearts.” When we forgive in words, allow your Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with peace. Thank you for the reminder, “Always be thankful.” Please help us grow close to you, let go of unforgiveness, and find the compassion that comes with true forgiveness. In this, we pray, Amen.

We are talking about the forgiveness of sins, and I think the world does not understand how Christians go about day-to-day life. This is where discipleship has its place in the Christian faith. Suppose people outside the faith think that we are all miserable sinners trudging through life with a step-by-step playbook to please God, a god who is constantly frustrated and angry with us, looking to destroy and send us to hell. That narrative is not confirmed by any means. As we look to the Bible back into the Old Testament, we see God as gracious, merciful, and forgiving. One of the most well-known stories in the Old Testament is where the people of God were enslaved in Egypt, and they cried out because of hard labor, abuse, and mistreatment, and God heard them. What happens? God sent Moses and Aaron to set the people free from slavery and toward the Promised Land. After they cross the Red Sea, Moses climbs the mountain at Mt. Sinai to commune with the Lord. Now, the Israelites, as they await the return of Moses, the people become concerned. Where is Moses? Did he leave us here to die? Hey Aaron, what are we to do? Let’s fashion a golden calf from the marks of our slavery! Hey ladies, give me your golden earrings. Then, what happens is that the people build an altar in front of the calf, sit down to eat and drink, and get up to indulge in partying.

Well, Moses comes back from the mountain, and the Lord says, “I have seen these people, and they are stiff-necked (stubborn) people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then, I will make you into a great nation.” If social media had been a thing back then, they would have called for fire to rain down upon these people, but that is not how God plays it. God takes a moment to chill out. Listen as I read from Exodus 34, beginning in verse 5 and ending in verse 9.

“Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.” Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped. “Lord,” he said, “if I have found favor in your eyes, then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance.” Here there are two points. One, God forgives, and second, we, as the people of God, united in the body of the holy catholic church and communion of saints, are the stage on which the forgiveness of God is made visible to the universal world.

By definition, “forgiveness” means forever and freely releasing someone from the burden of guilt. If we say God forgives, what are some of the things God the Father forgives us of? I

think about David and his love for the Lord, and yet he is so messed up that his secret sins had public consequences. One day, David is up on his roof, and he sees Bathsheba bathing, and he asks one of his servants, “Hey, who is that?” Well, that is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite. In an act of pre-meditated idolatry, David sent for her and took her. David’s sin did not stop there, for Israel’s most illustrious ruler, the man after God’s own heart became a seducer, adulterer, liar, and murderer. David keeps Uriah from his wife, gets him drunk, sends Uriah to the battlefield, and plots to have him killed. Bathsheba mourns Uriah’s death. Bathsheba became his wife and bore him a son. As a sad consequence of David’s sin with Bathsheba, the Lord struck the child so that he was very sick, and soon after, the infant son died. The things David had done displeased the Lord. Along comes good old Nathan the prophet, and David said to him, “I have sinned against the Lord.” And Nathan replied, “The Lord also has taken away your sin; you shall not die.” Later, David penned Psalm 51, a song of repentance pleading for God’s forgiveness.

God passionately detests sin, and yet that is hard to understand, offering forgiveness to those who repent. Be aware that sin is always a sin and deserving of punishment, confessed or not. Each one of us has a responsibility to shape the lives of the next generation. We do not have any secrets with God. Yet the offer of forgiveness is there right in front of us. Listen to verse 7 from Exodus 34 again. “**Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.**”

When we sin against God, we also sin against others. The effects of my rebellion against God affect not just me but also those around me. If you have children and you see that they are acting like you, be aware that your children pick up on both the good and the bad, the little things that are inconsistent. Our kids see things, and this has an everlasting effect on shaping who they will become.

The people of God are never more authentic when they confess their sins to God and each other and when they forgive one another. God will stand back and marvel when this happens. We must be honest about our brokenness and weaknesses, for the genuine and authentic church forgives. The people of God forgive because we have been forgiven. If by chance you are having difficulty with forgiveness, haunted by some season of life, or a current struggle, you must believe that you can be forgiven. There is a quote about forgiveness that C. S. Lewis wrote: “We all agree forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we have to practice it.”¹

In the weeks that we practice reciting the Creed, it helps us clarify that to affirm “the forgiveness of sins” is to declare that we have been forgiven. These words come right after “the Holy Catholic Church” and “the Communion of Saints.” Those of us who recite these words are part of the church because we are forgiven, and without forgiveness, we would not be here confessing this faith. Through the action of the Holy Spirit in whom we believe, the church is the

¹ C. S. Lewis. (n.d.). AZQuotes.com. Retrieved August 21, 2024, from AZQuotes.com Web site: <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/523175>

community of those who have experienced, and continue to experience, the forgiveness of sins, not forgetting to forgive the sins of others.

Forgiveness is connected to the Lord's Prayer: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Part of the problem is that if we do not forgive others, we are not convinced of God's forgiveness. Maybe this comes with considering ourselves better than those we refuse to forgive.

As I come to a close, I am reminded that Jesus constantly offered forgiveness to people who clearly needed to know that their lives could be made new. On the night before his crucifixion, at the Last Supper, Jesus took bread and wine and said, "Take and eat. This is my body. Drink from this, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many so that their sins may be forgiven. As he hung on the cross, he looked at his persecutors and prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus turned to the thief on the cross and said, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." Following his resurrection, Jesus told his disciples, "The forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations."

Brothers and sisters, forgiveness is a central part of the Christian faith. When we confess that we believe in the forgiveness of sins, we recognize that all of us need forgiveness to regain a relationship with God. We should realize that faith in the forgiveness of sins is not only with faith in the Holy Spirit but also with faith in the Church and the communion of saints. "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."