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Sept. 13, 2020- 15th Sun After Pentecost (Proper 19A)
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

“We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.

If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord... we are the Lord's.” †

Today's scripture readings, taken as a whole, speak of love and its fruits, forgiveness and acceptance. These virtues are hard to find in the world out there... where division, sexism, racism, and hatred are so prevalent... forgiveness and acceptance are rare, and at the heart of who we are as Christians.

I have to admit, I found today's Gospel a bit unnerving, and feel better that Peter (like me) seems, once again, to get himself in trouble by presuming God's plan regarding forgiveness. Jesus' response is simple yet stern, for those who call ourselves his followers, *the Ecclesia*, (as we learned last week, the gathered people of God), there is no limit to forgiveness! His words tell us that without forgiveness, there is no hope for mercy. He reminds us that we must forgive in order to be forgiven.

And once again, we hear from Paul's letter to the Romans, his attempt to quell the quarrels occurring in the young 1st Century Christian community in Rome. There was division and bickering among those who apparently felt 'strong' in faith and who saw no need to follow Jewish Kosher Law and practices, and those who felt the need to adhere to those ancient Jewish traditions. And Paul makes the point that neither of their choices is better than the other. Asserting that our personal opinions and practices don't matter in the end, when we all stand before the Lord together. The first line of the 14th Chapter is essential: "Welcome" (proslambanesthe- which means to receive or to accept with open arms). Welcome those who may be weak in the faith, not with the view of quarreling... the Greek for quarrelling (dialogismon) means judgment or opinion, so we are told not to pass judgment, not to confuse those new to the faith with complicated arguments over 'silly things' (the *adiaphora*- 'indifferent things') the Stoics and Martin Luther so often spoke of.

When I was young, I was raised by my parents to accept others and share with them. And I was fortunate enough to come from a very well-to-do family and live in a large beautiful home in South Florida. My mother did all kinds of volunteer work in Miami— as my father would sometimes remark, finding ways to spend his hard-earned money— including work in the inner-city (the poor black community). On a few occasions, she invited several children from that community to our home for a swim party at our pool and a picnic of hotdogs and burgers. At first, I felt a bit strange, for many of these kids were older and bigger than I was (I think I was in 1st grade), and I somehow felt threatened by their overtaking my home. And yet, I could hold my own, after all I knew how to swim well and most of them couldn't... it was no use, their tries to dunk the white boy. At one such gathering, I noticed a small boy about my age leave the yard and go into our house and I

followed him, assuming he needed to find the toilet. He went right in and ran up the stairs toward my room... MY room! I was incensed; what right did he have going up there into my space, how dare him! So I raced up the stairs to discover him playing with my stuff, I think it was GI Joe figures and Tonka trucks. I demanded, "What to you think you are doing?" And he looked up calmly and said, "Playing, these are some great toys! Come and play with me and be my friend." And, being a child of only 6 years old, that's just what I did! I had great fun (though at the time I knew somehow my mother would manage to give him one of my toys before he left). His name was Michael, and he became one of my best friend, but not until years after that. You see, we lived in different neighborhoods and did not attend the same school. Many years later, only after I left parochial school to attend public school, did we end up at the same High School, though we still lived in very different neighborhoods... and I remembered my friend when I saw him again, and he remembered me.

I can still recall how happy he made me feel whenever we were together, whether we were hanging out, running or cycling together, going to a movie, or even when I helped him study. I had grown to accept this 'outsider' as more than a friend, he was a brother. And when it came time for us to graduate and move on to college (I went to Duke), I just assumed he'd be applying and coming along with me. One day he just flat out told me, "I'm not as smart as you are... and even if I could get into Duke, my family can't afford it! Come on man, we're from different places; you'll move on and I'll stay here to work and never go to college."

I was mad, at him and at 'the system.' How unfair, how unforgiving, and how stupid to give up! In the end, I would help him apply and get into FIU, a great local university, and I suspect my parents helped with his tuition. The first year I was away at school, we'd write often and discuss our classes and futures, and I couldn't wait to see him that first Christmas break. When I finally got home and was about to call Michael, my father took me aside and shared that just after Thanksgiving, while he was working in the market by his house, he was shot and killed by the crossfire of some local drug dealers. One bullet, and his life ended even before it had begun.

I tell this story, because it's a reminder of how unjust and unforgiving our society can be, how often cruel it is. It took me years to even talk about it. And for years I blamed myself—for being white, rich, and smart, for not having to live & work in a dangerous neighborhood, for being alive! I also share this story because after his death, Michael's mother and my own spent the rest of my college years working on a local program to combat drug abuse and help rehabilitate his neighborhood. His mother had somehow forgiven those who took her son away from her. Realizing that they needed help, she accepted them as children of God. From her I learned, nothing we are called to forgive in others can ever remotely compare to what we are forgiven.

Although I am a white man and greatly privileged in society... I am also a gay man, a member of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Queer community. I know and have experienced hatred, prejudice, and lack of acceptance from society and the Church. And frankly, I find it hard to forgive sometimes.

We live in a world that hardly seems accepting, in a society that appears bent on anything but forgiveness. There's far too much emphasis on attacking and winning, and little mention of accepting the other. People seem fixated on promoting a singular, one-sided viewpoint—its about have and have-nots, Republicans and Democrats, blacks and whites, gays and straights— with little empathy for those who differ from them. There seems to be no progress in the ongoing battle between those who like the status quo or even yearn for yesteryear, and those who dream of a new world and yearn for change.

Turn back to Paul's letter, written to a young, diverse, headstrong community struggling with identity and change, as we all are today. It stresses what is lacking in 'the world,' acceptance and forgiveness. Let me offer you my own translation and paraphrase from the Greek:

“Receive and warmly welcome those who don't see things the way you do. Don't pass judgment and attack them when they do something you don't agree with, even though it may seem to you that they are over-opinionated and weak in faith. Welcome them and treat them gently. One may believe he can eat anything at table, when another from a different background assumes restrictions, perhaps a Vegan. Remember that both are guests at the same table, God's table. The same goes for those who think some days should be set apart as holy, while others think every day is holy. These things are a matter of social convention. What is important is your conviction! What is important, whether you keep the tradition or not, whether you keep a holy day or not, is that you do it for the Lord. Are you doing what you do for God's sake or for the sake of men? After all, our lives are not permanent! From life to death, we do not answer to anyone but God! And each of us will need to give an account of our self to God.”

Wise words.

Remember, nothing that we have to forgive in someone else can ever compare to what we have been forgiven. Like the chosen people of Exodus, who were led out of bondage and saved, in Jesus we have been freed from sin and offered life over death. We have been forgiven a debt beyond repaying! The message of Jesus is clear, accept 'the other,' the stranger, the one who is not like you... and forgive those who hurt you, as God has forgiven you, otherwise there will be no hope for mercy. Accept and forgive... Love. Love others, as God has loved us!

