

Homily given on the 15th Sunday after Pentecost
by the Reverend Doctor James McLean.

Welcome to the introduction of this Homily; which is a rhetorical question—“rhetorical” means you can’t answer out loud; but do answer in your head if you can.

The Catholic Church says the Lord’s Prayer has 7 petitions or requests (and I’m not going to argue with the Pope). Of those 7 petitions, one of them is mentioned twice. Which one is it? You have three seconds. . . . time’s up. The one Lord’s Prayer petition mentioned twice is Forgiveness: as in “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” That concludes the introduction.

Forgiveness is our focus, as it clearly is for the Gospel reading. So let me lead you in a brief exercise of the obvious---when you yourself repeat something, are you giving what you repeated added emphasis? And does that mean you think it’s more important? The answers are YES and YES! The disciples said to Jesus, “Teach us to pray.” His answer was the Lord’s Prayer. So the repetition regarding FORGIVENESS comes from Jesus himself, and it’s my firm conviction that he did that intentionally—not because he thought that Forgiveness is important—it’s because Jesus thought Forgiveness is CRUCIALLY important. And indeed it is! Yes, our daily bread is important, as is avoiding temptation. But forgiveness, I believe, has an urgency about it, as we can infer from Jesus emphasizing it. In the Gospel reading you just heard, Peter said, “Lord, if I forgive some jerk, and I forgive him/her as many as 7 times, good heavens, Lord, isn’t that enough?” And immediately Jesus replies, “NO!! You should forgive seventy-seven times—you should forgive constantly, completely, unceasingly. Forgive, forgive, forgive!”

Now, let’s give Peter his due. He did get one thing right. He had a firm grasp on the reality that forgiveness is hard; forgiving someone who’s cheated you, defamed you, lied to you, harmed you, disobeyed you. That can be a painful thing to do. The great Anglican writer C.S. Lewis captured this difficulty this way—he said, “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.” So true. But necessary. To live without the willingness to forgive is making the decision to live a miserable, lonely and destructive life. One of my favorite authors, Frederick Buechner,

has written a pithy few lines to illustrate what happens when forgiveness is withheld, and grievance and anger take over. He puts it this way:

“Of the 7 deadly sins, anger is the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor the last toothsome morsel . . . the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. But what you’re wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.” That’s always the case when forgiveness is cast aside for anger and resentment. You become hollowed out, mean-spirited, always bitter, full of acrimony and rancor. The skeleton at the feast really is you if you can’t forgive.

Before I retired, I’d been an Episcopal Priest for 38 years. I’d always preached about forgiveness when it popped up in Sunday readings. I tried to incorporate that into my life. I tried to forgive and urged others to do the same. I guess I was better than some, worse than others on that score.

But the issue of forgiveness in the year 2003 grabbed me by the neck and shoved me into a corner; at last I understood in spades what C.S. Lewis meant by his phrase, “Forgiveness is a lovely idea, until you have something to forgive.” In 2003, just 14 short years ago, Gene Robinson, a gay priest, was consecrated Bishop of New Hampshire. That began an enormous conflict in the Church and some embers still burn.

I was a Parish Priest in a congregation in which the controversy was the most heated in my Diocese and in which the largest percentage of communicants left the congregation. It was a very difficult time for all of us. The anger was palpable. About 40 or more people left the congregation. Over \$40,000 also left the Church. Many things that were said were hurtful, inflammatory, and, I must say, outright lies. Those cause wounds that don’t heal easily. I know.

So I had a choice—I could cling to being self-righteous, meaning hanging on to my anger and resentment; OR, I could quietly go about practicing what I preached. It took me a while. And forgiveness does take a while. I gradually came to understand that the greatest majority of those who left did not assault my integrity, or attack me personally. Their point of view was not my point of view. Our understanding of faith

wasn't the same. Our beliefs about the Church differed. Our positions on human sexuality were at odds. Their conscience dictated that they leave the Parish, and I felt I had to respect that. Which I did, and said so. What took some time were the personal insults and false accusations that made me want to slash back. I was tempted. But slowly—and deliberately—I came finally to the realization that for the folks who'd said those things, that really was the best they could do. And also, it gradually crept into my consciousness that I didn't need to feel defensive about things that were patently untrue. I figured I could live with that. And, thankfully, I did. If I hadn't, I would've become as embittered as those who attacked me.

When Jesus talked about Forgiveness to Peter, the Greek word is easy to get. You don't have to tease out its meaning. It means simply, "LET GO!" To forgive is to let go of grievance and anger so that a right relationship can be restored—otherwise known as reconciliation.

In a few moments from now, after the Creed and Prayers for the People, we will together say the Confession. We think of the Confession as somber, heavy, grim. And because of that, many of us have never noticed that in the very last sentence of the Confession is the word "DELIGHT". We are so conditioned to thinking of asking and receiving Forgiveness as so dour that it's almost like that word isn't there. But it IS there, whether we're aware of it or not: "HAVE MERCY ON US AND FORGIVE US; THAT WE MAY DELIGHT IN YOUR WILL AND WALK IN YOUR WAYS. . . ."

Imagine that—Forgiveness as DELIGHTFUL!

Maybe that will put the Prayer Book's Confession for you in a new light. And maybe, Forgiveness as well.