



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

**THE SEVENTH
SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST**

JULY 16, 2023

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

In the musical *Hamilton* Alexander Hamilton has publicly admitted to adultery to save his reputation with the electorate – but, of course, not so much with his wife, Eliza, who sent him to sleep in his office, burned all his letters to her, and as she said, took herself out of the narrative of his life. In that time of brutally painful consequence and estrangement, their son is killed in a duel. But they walk together in uptown New York, and her sister Angelica sings:

If you see him in the street, walking by her
Side, talking by her side, have pity.

...

They are trying to do the unimaginable.

There are moments that the words don't reach
There is a grace too powerful to name
We push away what we can never understand
We push away the unimaginable
They are standing in the garden
Alexander by Eliza's side
She takes his hand. It's quiet uptown.

Forgiveness. Can you imagine?
Forgiveness. Can you imagine?¹

It is, indeed, a grace too powerful to name.

In an emotionally charged courtroom in Johannesburg, South Africa, a black South African woman stood listening to white police officers acknowledge their atrocities.

Officer van de Broek acknowledged that, along with others, he had shot her eighteen year-old son at point blank range. He and others partied while they burned the son's body, turning it over and over on the fire until it was reduced to ashes.

¹ Lyrics © 2015 Hamilton Uptown LLC.

Eight years later, van de Broek and others returned to seize her husband. She was forced to watch her husband, bound on a woodpile, as they poured gasoline over his body and ignited the flames that [consumed him]. The last words she heard her husband say were 'forgive them.'

Now as van de Broek awaited judgment, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission asked the woman what she wanted.

"I want three things," she said calmly. "I want Mr. Van de Broek to take me to the place where they burned my husband's body. I would like to gather up the dust and give him a decent burial.

Second, Mr. Van de Broek took all my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to the ghetto and spend a day with me so that I can be a mother to him.

Third, I would like Mr. Van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him, too. I would like to embrace him so he can know my forgiveness is real."²

Unimaginable. And, again, there is a grace too powerful to name.

That's how to forgive.

Two thousand years before that a young Jewish prophet was crucified by the Romans for speaking truth to power. Among his final words were "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." As Jewish political theorist Hannah Arendt observed,

"[T]he discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth."³

And in his life and death, Jesus, like the scapegoat on the Jewish Day of Atonement, carried off our sins, never to be heard of again. God's forgiveness banishes all memory of our misdeeds.

And that is why we forgive.

Because we are forgiven by God.

² Stanley W. Green, "The Canadian Mennonite" (September 4, 2000) 11. This incident actually happened in a courtroom in Johannesburg, South Africa. Archbishop Desmond Tutu headed up an official government panel called the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Tutu, Desmond. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Doubleday. New York. 1999.

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958).

Few things could be more central to our faith. Christ in an act of perfect forgiveness, conquered sin and reconciled us to God. And dare we say that our being the erring, sinful creatures we are, we could have any relationship with God without God's insistent, gracious, and ongoing forgiveness. The relationship of the imperfect with the perfect could not otherwise exist.

Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father...Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." That's "as" we forgive, not "because" we forgive. It implies not condition, but collaboration. In us, God's forgiveness is enacted humanly.⁴ When we forgive, we take God's forgiving and, in a sense, put our own signatures underneath God's. And we endorse and reveal our gracious, loving, and forgiving God to the world.

And as the woman in the South African courtroom demands that we understand: We must like God forgive without limitation. No sin is unforgivable. No person is unforgivable.

In his book, *Free of Charge*, theologian Miroslav Volf puts it this way:

We forgive because God already has forgiven. For us to hold any offender captive to sin by refusing to forgive is to reject the reality of God's forgiving grace. Because Christ died for all, we are called to forgive everyone who offends us, without distinctions and without conditions. The hard work of indiscriminate forgiveness is what those who've been made in the likeness of the forgiving God should do.⁵

We might wonder though whether God demands our repentance before forgiving us? And, thus, should we demand repentance as a condition of forgiving? But as Volf observes:

God loves us and forgives us before we repent. Indeed, before we even sinned, Jesus Christ died for our sins. ... We can do nothing to become worthy of it for the same reason we can do nothing to earn any of God's gifts. Before we do anything, before we even exist, God's giving and God's forgiving are already there, free of charge. God's giving and forgiving are as

⁴ Haddon Wilmer, "Forgiveness," *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, ed., Adrian Hastings et al. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000) at 246.

⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2005) at 180.

unconditional as the sun's rays and as indiscriminate as raindrops.⁶

We also forgive because forgiveness is a necessity on a strictly human level.⁷ No human relationship can survive without it. People who do not forgive each other will destroy each other.⁸ But forgiveness plucks the offense from the heart of a relationship and paves the way for a harmonious relationship. It creates the hope that the relationship will be mended and restored.⁹

We forgive, too, because when we forgive, we transform not only the victim, but ourselves. Perhaps, that is why the last words of the murdered husband to his wife in South Africa counseled forgiveness.

Maybe he knew as a victim how destructive and debilitating anger and resentment could be.

Maybe he knew his wife could be consumed and destroyed by anger just as surely as he was being consumed by fire and destroyed by racism and hatred. He knew that forgiveness offers neither "the adrenaline rush of anger, nor the feeling of power that comes from a well-established resentment."

Instead, "[Forgiveness] is a quiet revolution, as easy to miss as a [Eliza Hamilton's] fist uncurling to become an open hand, but it changes people in ways that anger only wishes it could."¹⁰

Forgiveness. Can you imagine?

It is a grace too powerful to name.

So powerful that as that elderly widow finished speaking and was led across the courtroom in South Africa, Officer van de Broek fainted. Someone began singing "Amazing Grace." Gradually everyone joined in.¹¹

⁶ Volf 179-180.

⁷ Willmer at 246.

⁸ Willmer at 247.

⁹ Volf at 188.

¹⁰ Taylor, Barbara Brown, *Christianity Today* (Feb. 9, 1998).

¹¹ Stanley W. Green, "The Canadian Mennonite" (September 4, 2000) 11. This incident actually happened in a courtroom in Johannesburg, South Africa. Archbishop Desmond Tutu headed up an official government panel called the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Tutu, Desmond. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Doubleday. New York. 1999.