

The quality of mercy

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert B. Edson, in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Day of Pentecost, Whitsunday, on May 11, 2008.

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Acts 2:2

Fifty days after Passover, the disciples gathered for Pentecost, the Jewish festival of the Feast of Weeks. This festival was both an offering of thanksgiving to God for the first fruits from the winter planting of grain as well as in commemoration of the giving of the Torah. On that day, the place where the disciples had gathered was shaken by a loud, violent wind that filled the entire place, overwhelming them with a sense of God's presence. They were given gifts for ministry for the new Christian community, among which were wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment; understanding various languages, counsel, strength, and respect. They were also able to speak in the languages of people from all parts of Asia. All these gifts came from God's Holy Spirit to be used for the common good. Today we celebrate the Day of Pentecost when the power of God's Holy Spirit was given to the apostles to go out to do the reconciling and redeeming work of the church. God's work of redemption gives value and worth to all humanity. Just as we take our empty bottles and cans to a redemption center and we receive the value of their deposit, in the same way the church is a redemption center where we are redeemed and given value and worth in our forgiveness.

Jesus commissioned the disciples with the power and authority to declare forgiveness of sins in God's name. Confession and forgiveness are essential to reconciliation. There are many who do not know that in the Episcopal Church we have sacramental confession, one of the most misunderstood sacraments of the church. The rule for confession is that all may, some should, but none must. And, I might add, few do. It is important to know that you are confessing your sins to God in the presence of the priest who assures you of God's forgiveness. If we accept our own forgiveness, we have no choice but to forgive others. To those who are not sincere or refuse it, their sins remain.

The quality of mercy and forgiveness is the distinctive mark of the Christian. You may have read or heard about the young girl in Boston who forgave the man who shot her and left her paralyzed. There is something so very powerful in the capacity of that young child to forgive the one who caused her such pain and loss. Would that we all could be so forgiving!

C.S. Lewis wrote that everyone thinks that forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive. For many of us, there are not one, but two people living inside of us. One of us is willing to be compassionate and forgiving and not bear grudges. The other is less patient and feels that we can forgive, but we can't forget. After burying the hatchet, we leave a marker. We may be able to forgive our enemies, but we remember their names. Too often we hang on to our anger and hurt and won't let go. We want to be more compassionate and forgiving, but pride and anger hold us back. To be so unwilling to forgive others is related to an unwillingness to accept our own forgiveness. I know that my forgiveness is complete when I can't remember what the hurt or anger was about.

Martin Luther King, apostle of non-violent resistance in the face of evil, said that if you are devoid of the power to forgive, you are without the power to love. There is some good in the

worst of us and some evil in the best of us, but no one is beyond redemption. Even the most abusive, demonic personality who cleverly manipulates and controls others can be redeemed and forgiven. If God can forgive the worst in us, can we not find it within our own capacity to forgive others?

In the prayer our Lord taught us, there is a condition in the petition, "Forgive our trespasses and sins as we forgive those who trespass and sin against us." It makes clear that if we accept our own forgiveness, we can't withhold it from others. The hard truth is that those things we find most difficult to forgive are those things of which we ourselves are guilty.

As a clergyperson is required to report child abuse cases, on two occasions I intervened as I felt it my duty. In both instances, I was roundly criticized by the family who minimized it and in one case got a mutual clergy friend to reprimand me and in another the family refused to speak to me ever again.

On this day in which we honor all mothers, I don't need to remind any of you that it isn't easy being a parent and children don't come with a set of instructions. We don't know how hard it is until we become parents and we take a big step in maturity and realize that we never grow up until we stop blaming our parents. It is often from our mother that we learn the importance of the quality of mercy and forgiveness. As a father, I have always believed that the most important thing we can do for our children is to love their mother. And that I did. One of the things I loved about her was her common sense and the way she taught me not to take myself too seriously. We were fortunate in having good mother figures. Though I no longer have either a mother or a mother-in-law, today I honor all of you who are mothers.

We can all do better by being slow to accuse and quick to forgive. The qualities of mercy and forgiveness are needed more than ever in this confusing and sometimes very unforgiving world.

In Shakespeare's, *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia says to Shylock:
 The quality of mercy is not strained,
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
 Upon the place beneath: it is twice blessed;
 It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

Merchant of Venice, Act 4, scene 1