



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

## Why Forgive?

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 12th, 2017*

*The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany*

*Based on Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Matthew 5:21-37*

*Come Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us;  
Take our lips and speak through them.  
Take our hearts and see through them.  
Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen.*

The title of this sermon is "Why Forgive?", and it's a good question, because we're all very clear about why we shouldn't.

I can give you a hundred reasons why I shouldn't forgive the injustices perpetrated against me over the years.

I've been treated unfairly. I've been lied to. We were betrayed. Life hasn't been fair, and God hasn't always seemed just...or even good. A child died tragically, a friend died a painful death after a terrible illness, a mother or father died much too young, and God seemed to be nowhere. Nowhere!

And it can be even deeper than that. Some of us have undergone physical hurt at the deepest levels; abuse and violence so horrific it's traumatic to even recall it.

The list of injuries and losses is beyond all counting.

And, make no mistake about it, all of us; every last person in this church this morning has been hurt. Deeply hurt.

It's the primordial wound which binds us all together.

What people don't understand about Christians is that we don't come to church to celebrate our innate goodness... We come in search of healing for our intrinsic brokenness.

No one gets out of this life unscathed, and nothing - not money, not power, not success... not a good family, not even a devout and faithful life, can deliver you from this inevitable fact of life. Sometimes things stink.

Now, this morning's gospel is one of the shoals upon which many a preacher has been shipwrecked.

This is perhaps a time where a more thoughtful Rector would be listening to the Associate Clergy hold forth on murder, adultery, divorce and all those liable to the "hell of fire."

But let's agree to take on the difficult words of Christ as if they matter and let's understand we won't be able to break down everything this scripture invites us to examine in 12 minutes.

To be sure, Jesus is saying here that the mere rule of law is not going to be NEARLY a high enough bar for those who would follow him. Adultery is not the mere act. Murder can happen without ever taking a life!

**“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times...but I say to you....”**

Jesus is establishing a new order, a new commandment, and an entirely new standard for behavior.

**“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’ and, ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to the judgement. And if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool.’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.”**

We can forgive or we can nurse our anger. We can choose reconciliation, or we can retaliate. You can forgive, or you can become a repository of all the hatred your enemies so richly deserve.

It’s as old as time itself. Remember in *The Iliad*, the great Achaean warrior, Achilles, is sulking in his tent because his commander, Agamemnon, has taken away a female captive for whom he has feelings. And because of this personal animosity, the whole tide of the Trojan War begins to shift.

Of course, sometimes it’s not as intense as all that. It’s a kind of a nit-picking, a “Mary and Martha, still squabbling after all these years” thing. (Does sibling rivalry ever cease?) “Why doesn’t Mary help me? Can’t you get her to do her share of the work? I’m sick and tired of doing all this cooking and cleaning.” Somehow I feel this wasn’t the first-time Martha uttered that complaint. And yet this small domestic scene from first-century Palestine still resonates with us because we, too, experience conflict regarding petty things. We, too, become irritated, and then lash out at the ones we love.

Herman Melville describes old Captain Ahab, who became obsessed with hunting down that Great White Whale. He writes,

“The white whale swam before him as **a mono-maniacal** incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living with half a heart, and half a lung.”

I’m thinking that Mr. Melville may have known a little something about all this.

### **So where does forgiveness begin?**

Well first we have to learn to forgive ourselves.

Bill Swing, the former Bishop of California, once said to the young clergy of his diocese.

“You’ve got to learn to forgive yourself in this business, because you are going to make some whopper mistakes.”

He had no earthly idea.

Sometimes the only person we **can’t** forgive is ourselves. And why is it easier to forgive almost everyone else but us? The frightening, alarming rate of male suicide should be a warning to us that people are having a tough time forgiving themselves for their mistakes, their sins, their foibles, their miscalculations, and all the places where they have fallen short. And what a terrible tragedy it is, to deprive a family of the rest of your life!

We must learn to forgive ourselves.

### **Why should we forgive?**

Because we were forgiven, and because we were not worth forgiving.

We have been forgiven, and we did not earn it.

We have been forgiven of the most shameful and reprehensible things, and we did not deserve it.

But God sent Jesus as a sign of forgiveness. Jesus was asked if we should we forgive seven times. “Not seven, but seventy.” he replied. How much forgiveness is that?

Begin counting them – one, two, three, four... and then stop at seventy.

Remember the story of the loving father?

A man had two sons, and one was the apple of his eye; went to Harvard undergrad, dated a nice girl. She went to Dalton. The other son was a ne'er-do-well. He could just never get it right. Sex, drugs, rock and roll... the whole bit. Finally, one day when everyone in the family was tired of him, he came to his dad and said, "Look, I want my piece of the family business." And the other brother was just outraged. I mean, what an insult!

But the father said, "Yeah, ok" and he gave it to him. He gave him his fair share of the business and the boy just took off. He went to Vegas, he went to Rio, he went to everywhere the party was and, wherever he was, that was where the party was at. Until the recession came, and then all of the hangers-on who helped him spend his money started to disappear one-by-one. And he didn't have a job... and he didn't have any money, and he actually started to be hungry. So he looked for a place to just get a meal, and he found that if he could work at a fast food place, he could eat the food leftover on the trays. And then he came to himself. And then he said to himself,

"My dad will never give me my old job back, but maybe I could go back and he would let me work with the other laborers because the people who work for him are doing better than I am."

So, the son expects nothing, and he makes the long trip back home to his father. And it's a long trip back home. And he's dreading the "I told you so's."

And the father sees him coming from a long way off, and old men don't get up from their chairs and run very often, but this man did. He got up from his chair and he ran to embrace his son who had been so very, very lost.

This is the story Jesus told when his disciples asked him, "What is the kingdom of God like? What is God like?" The son didn't deserve that kindness. He didn't merit that forgiveness. But I'm telling you that boy was loved. And haven't you... haven't you taken your share and run and squandered it, and had somebody say, "I love you...and I forgive you?"

How can we not forgive in return?

On the cross, as our Lord hung dying, he forgives the penitent thieves who hang beside him.

We need to forgive for our own sake because hatred is like an acid; it destroys the container it's in before it ever harms anything else. And this kind of forgiveness is a radical notion; it is truly counter-cultural.

And we have not, we clergy have not, done a very good job of teaching all of you who come week after week to hear the Gospel preached. We are afraid to tell you that the Gospel we've been given is a radical gospel, and it calls us to be different from the world.

The world wants vengeance, the world wants to take its share, the world wants to see justice done, and Jesus says, "Forgive, Forgive, Forgive."

G.K. Chesterton once famously observed it's not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting, it's that true Christianity has seldom been tried. "You've heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' but I say to you, do not resist an evildoer." What can be more radical than that? Why forgive? Because we want to, we need to go to that next level.

My son, William, loved video games when he was younger and, I confess I enjoyed playing them with him. But the darned thing about a video game is that you've got to be successful at the first level before you can get to the second or third level where all the fun stuff is. So I've driven that rebel squadron leader through I don't know how many mazes, but I can never get to the Star Wars finale. We can't... we won't... get to the next level unless we forgive.

"Beloved," said the Apostle Paul (who knew a little something about anger from his own life) said, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God. For it is written. Vengeance is mine, I will repay says the Lord." The implications of this are startling.

Well, I don't know if you've heard one thing this morning that's authentically new. You know why you need to forgive. You already know what it does to you when you don't.

You already know what it does to your friends and neighbors and family members. Still, many of you, I suspect, hold on to that one thing you believe defies all forgiveness.

What power you give to that sinner! What power you give, when you say that, “it’s beyond forgiveness.” You give that incident; that person, power over the rest of your life. And I doubt very seriously whether any of those who have sinned against you merit that kind of distraction from your own living of your life.

My dear brothers and sisters,

we must forgive.

There is no other option.

We must forgive.

There is no other way.

We must forgive... for our own soul’s sake. Amen.

---

1) It’s hard to walk down a city street at this time of year without being reminded that Saint Valentine’s Day is right around the corner; news which evokes either a kind of romantic warmth... or a cold dread among folks. But beyond the cards and the candy is an interesting story about Saint Valentine.

History and legend tell us Valentine was either a priest or a bishop in Rome in the days of Emperor Claudius II.

“Under the rule of Claudius, Rome was involved in many unpopular and bloody (military) campaigns. The Emperor needed a strong army but he was having a difficult time getting soldiers to join his military leagues. Claudius believed Roman men were unwilling to join the army because of their strong attachments to their wives and families.

So, to eliminate the problem, Claudius simply banned all marriages and engagements in Rome.

Now Valentine, realizing the injustice of the decree, defied the emperor and continued to perform marriages for young lovers in secret.

When Valentine’s actions were discovered, Claudius ordered him put to death. He was arrested and dragged before the Prefect of Rome who condemned him to be beaten to death with clubs and to have his head cut off.

He is thought to have been executed on February 14<sup>th</sup>, around the year 278 AD.

Kevin Bayzon, in his book, *The Seven Perennial Sins and Their Offspring*, writes

“In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in England, when the Lord Chancellor Thomas Moore refused to subscribe to the Act of Supremacy, making King Henry VIII the head of the Church of England, Moore was sentenced to death for treason. Yet, in his son-in-law’s account, Moore, the Angelical wit and man of clear, unspotted conscience, told the court which had condemned him, “I verily trust, and shall therefore right heartily pray, that thru your Lordships, that though here on earth your Lordships have been judges to my condemnation, we may yet hereafter all merrily meet in heaven together to our everlasting.”

Aren’t you simply awestruck by Moore’s generosity of spirit? Aren’t you amazed by his ability to anticipate a future reunion with those who were arrayed against him?

**©2017 St. Bartholomew’s Church in The City of New York.**

For information about St. Bart’s and its life of faith and mission  
write us at [central@stbarts.org](mailto:central@stbarts.org), call 212-378-0222, or visit [stbarts.org](http://stbarts.org)  
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022