

Forgiveness Sunday



Christ tells us that... “if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you your trespasses.” (Matthew 6:14). Today is a day on which we prepare to return to God wholeheartedly and in earnest, trusting in the wealth and profundity of His forgiveness. And a day on which we ask one another specifically for forgiveness, embracing one another in peace, so that we may feel the warmth and serenity of God’s Fatherly embrace as well.

If our first parents, Adam and Eve, had trusted in God’s forgiveness, they would not have lost Paradise and fallen from the divine life they shared with Him. Adam and Eve’s original sin was one of disobedience, yes- but much more than that. They gave in to Satan’s temptation that God could not be trusted, that they should doubt His Word and His love, and put that Word to the test. Basically, Adam and Eve – and all mankind after them – fell by not having faith in God, not trusting Him, not confiding in Him as a loving and provident Father – and a forgiving Father!

We can see how this failure to trust and confide in God continued after their initial act of disobedience and debilitated their lives. When they had eaten of the forbidden fruit, they did not face up to what they had done and approach God, trusting in his love and forgiveness. Instead, they hid themselves from Him. They allowed shame to overwhelm them and keep them from facing God their Father in honest repentance. When God called out to them as He walked in the garden of Paradise, Adam told Him that he was hiding from God because of his nakedness. No longer at peace with himself, no longer comfortable with even his own body, Adam had allowed his sense of shame to overwhelm him and drive him farther apart from God. This, too, was a triumph for Satan – not only his success in the first temptation but his victory in suggesting to Adam that God would no longer love him or forgive him – that he could not face God.

One of the spiritual fathers of the Church tells us that, before we sin, Satan always suggests to us the idea that our transgression against God will not be so serious, that he will not hold it against us. Then, after we have sinned, the same Tempter and Enemy tells us that God will never forgive us.

This is what happened with our first parents. Guilt and shame kept them from God and compound their sin. When God finally sought them out in their place of hiding and asked them if they had eaten the forbidden fruit, they still would not answer Him honestly. He knew, of course, what they had done, but He was giving them an opportunity to admit it themselves – to confess their sin, in other words. But, instead of accepting responsibility for what he had done, Adam blamed Eve – “The woman, whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” In other words, Adam was saying, ashamed though he was, “it was not my fault – the woman is to blame.” And Eve, following Adam’s cowardly example, passed the buck herself – “The serpent beguiled me,” she said, “and I ate.” In other words – it was the serpent’s fault – I didn’t know what I was doing. No honest acceptance of responsibility here – no simple

confession like that of the Prodigal Son who candidly and concisely told his father, “I have sinned against heaven and before you.” No humble admission like that of the repenting Publican in the parable, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” Adam and Eve fall deeper into the grasp of Satan and the curse of sin by refusing to face God openly and with trust in His love – even after their disobedience.

What I am suggesting, of course, is that God would have forgiven them, would have allowed them to remain with Him and share His life – had they only been sorry, humble and repentant. This is not my own personal interpretation of the extent and nature of the original sin. It is that of the Orthodox Tradition, as stated very beautifully by the great mystic and father of the tenth and eleventh centuries St. Simeon the New Theologian. He writes in his discourses: “Do you see, dear friend, how patient God is, for when He said, ‘Adam, where are you’ and when Adam did not at once confess his sin but said, ‘I heard the sound of thee, O Lord, and realized that I am naked and hid myself’, God was not angered nor did He immediately turn away. Rather, He gave Adam the opportunity of the second reply and said, ‘Who told you that you are naked? Unless you ate of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ Consider how profound are the words of God’s wisdom. He says, ‘why do you say that you are naked, but hide your sin? Do you really think that I see only your body, but do not see your heart and your thoughts?’ since Adam was deceived, he hoped that God would not know his sin...while he was thinking these thoughts – as indeed many do, even now (and I myself am the first) when they hide their own evil deeds – God, unwilling to multiply his guilt, says, ‘How did you realize you were naked? Unless you ate of the tree...’ It is as though He said, ‘Do you really think you can hide from me? Do I not know what you have done? Will you not say, I have sinned...have mercy on me!’” But Adam does not say this. He does not humble himself, does not bend. The neck of this heart is like a sinew of iron, as is mine, wretch that I am! For had he said this, he might have stayed in Paradise. By this one word, he might have spared himself that whole cycle of evils without number that he endured by his expulsion and in spending many centuries in hell...But he denied his sin and did not repent even when God reproved him, for he said, ‘the woman thou gavest me, she deceived me’ – ‘whom Thou gavest me’ – how thoughtless a soul, as though to say to God, ‘thou hast made a mistake – the woman Thou gavest has deceived me...’ When Eve too was unable to say, ‘I have sinned,’ both were cast out of the place of enjoyment. They were banished from Paradise and from God. But consider how deep are the mysteries of God’s love for men...had they repented, they would not have been expelled.”

So says St. Simeon and our Scriptural Tradition. Not only would Adam and Eve not have been expelled, but all mankind would have had a second chance to abide in peace with God. But, for lack of trust in God’s mercy, we all fell from peace. Adam and Eve, man and woman, fell into enmity, accusing each other for their mutual woes. As God told Eve, “your desire will be for your husband, but he will lord it over you.” The marital relations of men and women would be fought with tension, once peace with God was lost. Peace among men vanished as Adam and Eve’s own son Cain murdered his brother Abel, beginning the tragic history of blood-letting for personal advantage that continues even today as we fight over control of oil. Once peace with God was lost through lack of trust, trust and peace vanished from among men. In Paradise, man had been at peace with God, his own kind, and with the other creatures of the earth. Now that peace with God was lost through lack of trust, man found himself an alien on his

own earth, fighting it and its flora and fauna in a bitter struggle to survive. This is the legacy of Paradise Lost for want of trust. For refusal to seek forgiveness.

So, now on this Forgiveness Sunday, we seek to retrace our steps to Paradise, to God's fatherly forgiveness, to the lost peace and harmony of Eden. We will need, in the Lenten season which is ahead, to do what Adam and Eve would not do, that is: - to admit our sins frankly; - to lay aside all excuses and attempts to blame someone else; - to trust in God's love – that His mercy is far stronger than our false shame and egoistic sense of guilt.

But, before we can move back to God and experience the peace of paradise, we must begin by making peace with each other. By asking forgiveness of one another and granting it to each other. All of us – neighbors, acquaintances, parents and children brothers and sisters, husbands and wives. This is the Orthodox Tradition of Forgiveness Sunday. In Orthodox Russia of centuries past, on this day, people would stop one another – even strangers – on the street or wherever they met. They exchanged this greeting: “Forgive me a sinner,” one would say; and the other would respond, “God forgive you may He forgive me.” Before seeking forgiveness of God and peace with Him, men and women would seek and grant forgiveness of each other, would seek peace on earth. Thus they would fulfill Christ's clear counsel: “If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you...” This is the same Tradition we try to keep on this Forgiveness Sunday. In church, and in our homes, we try to retrace our steps to the peace of God by embracing each other and making peace with one another through mutual forgiveness. It is not at all easy to try to make peace. But, as we trust in God's forgiveness, we also trust that he will give us the courage and strength and humility to approach one another in peace – laying accusations and recriminations aside for the sake of gaining the life of peace with God which is our common calling and heritage.

From “*The Light of Orthodoxy*” radio program,
Father Thomas Mueller, Ss. Cyril & Methodius
Orthodox Church, Milwaukee, WI