

Sermon for Proper 19/A – 14 September 2008

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Exodus 14:19-31 – Psalm 114 – Romans 14:1-12 – Matthew 18:21-35

I'm guessing that at least some of you—like me—love to watch the continual PBS reruns of that British comedy, *Keeping Up Appearances*. If you don't know the series, it primarily concerns an overbearing woman—Hyacinth Bucket, pronounced *Bouquet*—who is always trying to overcome her working-class roots, hoping—as she says—that people will assume she was “born to the Candlelight Supper set.”

Hyacinth makes life miserable for everyone, not least for her longsuffering neighbor, Elizabeth. For perfectly obvious reasons, poor Elizabeth's nerves go to pieces every time she's in Hyacinth's house, especially when Hyacinth insists on serving her morning coffee or afternoon tea in one of the cups of her rapidly-diminishing “Royal Doulton with the hand-painted periwinkles.” Well, you know what happens ... Hyacinth's antics cause Elizabeth to lose it every time, and *crash* goes yet another cup and saucer, *splash* goes more brown liquid on Hyacinth's Grade-A Axminster fitted carpet or on her exclusive hand-knotted Burmese kitchen rug.

Time after time, Elizabeth says, “Oh, Hyacinth, I'm terribly sorry!” Time after time, Hyacinth accepts the apology, only immediately to backhand Elizabeth verbally. “Now, Elizabeth,” she'll say, “we're not going to fall out over a cup and saucer ... even a very expensive, irreplaceable cup and saucer.” Or my personal favorite, “There, now dear, it's all over ... all over everywhere!”

My point in reliving some of this with you is that—like so many of us—Hyacinth only pretends to forgive. Maybe—like so many of us—she *thinks* that she has forgiven, but if that's so, then she—like so many of us—has no understanding of what true forgiveness is. Our own English word is a little circuitous; it comes through Middle English roots that essentially speak of “through giving.” That word picture says that the concept we know as “forgiveness” has to do with “giving up:” giving up anger, giving up resentment, giving up the feeling of being wronged, assaulted, deprived, and hurt. Is it any wonder that neither Hyacinth nor we like forgiveness? Of course not! When I feel those things—wronged, assaulted, deprived, and hurt—the last option I want to exercise is to say, “Oh ... ok ... I'll just give them up!” Nine times out of ten, or

maybe even ten times out of ten, we want to hold on to them, to salve our wounded feelings by nursing these grudges. And that's when we are most like Hyacinth Bouquet: vain, arrogant, and pretentious.

Please understand that for the moment, I'm speaking more about the minor slings and arrows of life. Never would I want to trivialize the major assaults which so many of us have experienced. Those major assaults—things such as the wrongful death of a loved one, such as childhood abuse, such as physical and sexual assault—these things require a much more careful approach, and we'll come to them in a moment. Even so, I can tell you from my own experience that if we don't know how to manage the minor slings and arrows of life, we will almost certainly fail spectacularly when real trouble comes.

But let's do the easy stuff first; so how are we to handle these lesser offenses? What do we do about the self-centered person who pushes in ahead of us in the check-out line? What about the so-called friend who spreads either malicious gossip or inconvenient truth about us? What about the people who accidentally break something dear to our hearts? What about the people who won't take our calls or return our E-mail? I work for the State of Arizona, and there are plenty of people who expect me to jump the minute *they* call or E-mail; the problem is that it's not reciprocal.

The only answer I have ever found to these and countless similar situations came from my late, dear, sometime colleague on the faculty of Episcopal Divinity School. The Rev'd Dr. Lloyd George Patterson was simply the most brilliant person I have ever known. He could discourse with breathtaking scholarship not only in English, but also in Greek and Latin. He was a personal friend to some of the finest Anglicans of the 20th Century, including the likes of Archbishop Temple and the poet T.S. Eliot, whom he knew well enough to call "Tommie." Where there could—with due cause—have been reason for Hyacinth Bouquet's vanity and pretension, Lloyd was the most down-to-earth person you can imagine. When I would get ensnared with one of these little personal imbroglios, one of these little minor slings and arrows, Lloyd invariably said to me, "John, instead of being arrogant enough to judge these people, can you be humble enough to let their actions judge you?"

Talk about breathtaking! There was the answer I'd been seeking for so long! Through alcoholic recovery and 12-Step Work in AA, I had learned the hard way that I really cannot afford either anger or resentment, but I just didn't know how to leap across the huge trenches that anger and resentment always dig in our lives. Lloyd gave me the bridge. Instead of fuming about how I'd been wronged, instead of imagining exquisite revenge, instead of going from "Sweetheart" to "Beast" in 30 seconds whenever I relived whatever was so upsetting, Lloyd said simply, "Don't do it!"

Here's how I've adapted his technique. Instead of revisiting and reliving the events that make us furious, stop; take a deep breath; acknowledge that whatever was done really is hurtful. It almost always helps to say why it's hurtful. If I can say something along the lines of, "When she broke my great-grandmother's Limoges chocolate pot, I lost the last tangible connection to my grandmother and her sisters. There's no one left now to remember them with me. I still miss those amazing women, and losing that connection makes me so sad!" Or when I realize that my more important State employee colleagues are not even going to *take* my call, never mind return it, it's time to say, "When they expect me to jump, but are never available when I need them, it makes me feel so slighted and belittled. It's as though I'm not worth even human civility!"

That's a good thing to do, but we can't stop there. Stopping there is sure to lead to a Grade A session of "Poor Me!" As soon as we acknowledge what we're really feeling, it's time to apply Step 2 of the Patterson method. It's time to allow the incident to judge us. Allowing the incident to judge us sounds like, "How many times do I cause people to feel ignored, slighted, worthless, and insignificant?" "How many times have I broken something that someone else cherished deeply?"

If I'm honest, I can usually come up with a fistful of quick examples! Now, I don't want you to think that I'm a paragon of virtue when it comes to putting this into practice! More often than not, I fall miserably short in the heat of the moment, and usually I think of doing the Patterson Two-Step only when I'm in such a sorry state that I know something else has to be done!

Even though I wish I could do it more often more immediately, doing it when I'm in a sorry state is when I know that this technique really does work. It works because it promotes the real sense that no matter who we are, no matter what we'd like to think about ourselves, no matter who we wish other people thought us to be, the truth is that we're all just Bozos on the Bus of Life! None of us is perfect; or, as St. Paul would say, "All of us have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Or again, as Paul says in today's Epistle, "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves." We are all in this life together, miserable sinners, Bozos on the Bus, none of whom is blameless or without our own exquisite faults, both great and small.

But I am mindful that we stand today in the shadow of the anniversary of 9/11, so it is not possible to stop with minor examples and to gloss over acts which are truly egregious, truly heinous. How do we respond when fellow human beings try to destroy us, as in the 2001 Attack on America? How do we respond when a drunk driver kills our child? How do we respond when we know our lives have been distorted by an abusive priest, parent, or relative?

These are not easy issues to deal with, but today's Gospel has something profound to say about them. Jesus tells a very hard parable about a servant who was forgiven, yet who turned around and refused to forgive a fellow servant who owed him. You heard the conclusion: "And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

That is undoubtedly hard; it is also absolutely brilliant. What Jesus understands, what Jesus is saying to us is that when we fail to forgive each other—no matter what!—we allow ourselves to be tortured. I would say it slightly differently: when we fail to forgive each other—no matter what!—we are literally in hell, a hell of our own making! Around and around and around goes the squirrel cage of our minds! One minute we are bereft with grief, and the next minute we are boiling over with rage! Marriages are torn apart by spouses who cannot or will not reach across the tears and the pain to comfort each other. Health is wrecked by allowing anger and rage to eat away on the inside. We are literally in hell; we are literally in a hell of our making. And there are no two ways about it. We don't get to say how justified we are in our anger, in our

hurt, and in our resentment. We don't get to say that, because it doesn't make any difference. Here is one of those binary, Off/On, Black/White issues. We have a choice between spiritual health and emotional turmoil; we have a choice between mental health and disease. We can either deal with what has happened to us and live, or let it destroy us until we die. That is what I mean by saying that either we learn to forgive from the heart, or we live in a hell of our making.

A moment ago, I said that we stand today in the shadow of the anniversary of 9/11, and I'm sure that virtually no one needed to be reminded of that. But because the Sunday Proper takes precedence over anything but a Feast of Our Lord, we may have forgotten that we also stand today in the Feast of the Holy Cross. This very day of the Kalendar, September 14, is Holy Cross Day, a day upon which we remember how God chose what was shameful, what was weak, what was despised to work the salvation of the world. How much that says to us when we are tempted to take revenge, when we are tempted to meet violence with violence. How much it says when we think that not to wreak vengeance is to be weak, shamed, and despicable.

Please don't misunderstand me; I am not speaking of whether we should or should not be at war in Iraq and Afghanistan. That is a serious issue, but it is not the focus of our lectionary today. What I will say about the war that is consistent with the message of today's Gospel is that it is the duty of every Christian to insist that forgiveness from the heart be an essential component of any international military action. If we are not willing to do this, then we have no right to ask either God's blessings on our endeavor or God's protection for our men and women in uniform. For I will say this about the present war, and about any other war: there is no victory without honor, and there is no honor without forgiveness from the heart.

And I will confess to you that I wondered about my own words as I watched the videos of that fateful day being replayed last Thursday. I will confess that I wanted to cry bitter tears of frustration over how hard it can be to forgive, to "give up," and to let go. Beloved, I don't think for a moment that our Loving God does not care; I am deeply convinced that our Lord's heart aches even more than ours when we grieve. And that's where the Collect for the Feast of the Holy Cross speaks to us in powerful and empowering ways. It prays that even as we glory in the mystery of our own

redemption, in the mystery of our own forgiveness, that we might have grace “to take up our cross and follow him.”

What does that mean? I believe that the cross we are to take up is nothing less than our own frail, flawed humanity. The cross that we shoulder is ourselves, with all of our gifts and with all of our warts. When we stand in the shadow of the Christ who was “lifted high upon the cross that he might draw the whole world to himself,” the magnitude of that sight gives us the perspective we need to try to say, “OK ... I will do my best to forgive from my heart! If the sinless Son of God can love me enough to endure such agony for my sake, if the Lord of Love can allow his sinless Son to give himself for such a worm as I, who am I to withhold forgiveness to *anyone*?”

May the Eternal God of Life and of Love give us all grace to stand between these two shadows—the evil shadow of 9/11 and the redeeming shadow of the Cross—and having dared to stand, may we take up our humanity and through it, and with it share such extravagant love freely in a broken, wounded, grieving world.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*