

Good morning. Well we have made it to November! Four more Sundays until Advent, which is December 3rd this year. This is the latest possible start for Advent because the 4th Sunday of Advent is Christmas Eve. All of this to say that we have almost come to the end of another year. This is the last month prior to beginning our ecclesiastical calendar all over again starting with the feast of St. Andrew on the 30th of November. Like so many things in this life, as we draw near to the end of a long trek or a long task, be it an educational degree or a career, or anything similar, we tend to let down our guard; we tend to lose carefulness.

Certainly this is a natural tendency. After having exerted so much effort and care for so long, we grow tired. May may not consciously think, "Oh, I'm just not going to be careful anymore." We naturally are not as careful after years of effort as we were when we first started. We lose our sharpness.

But sometimes we lose much more than we could have imagined in those final stages of a task or a goal. As a teacher I used to warn my students to finish the school year strongly. Don't let up now and ruin all the hard work you've put in. We can see the same tendency when a runner or athletic team with a comfortable lead lets up at the end of the competition, only to be caught in the final strides or the final minutes. It is the tortoise and the hare all over again. Or a watchman may have been faithful for the entire hours-long watch, but a five-minute nap causes the stronghold to fall. A whole race, or game, or life may be upended due to neglecting to keep alert and watchful. Everything may change in a moment of carelessness.

Today's collect and lessons also encourage us to finish well; not only that to finish the year well, but also that we would finish our very lives well. The collect begins, "Lord, we beseech thee to keep thy household the Church in continual godliness." To keep something in safety is to watch over it and to guard it so that it would not come to harm and would not be stolen away or flee. So the collect is a request to God that He would be ever vigilant so that the Church would remain healthy and vital. This is not, particularly, a request for supernatural aid, as much as a request that those responsible for the leadership and health of the Church would not let up in their charge. And actually this goes beyond the leadership of the local church. It includes a request that every member of God's church would maintain their diligence even when the watch is long or the task is wearying.

We notice a similar theme from St. Paul in his epistle to the Philippians. This reading is from his opening greetings to the Church in Philippi. He first commends and thanks these believers for sharing in the work of the gospel through their prayer and contributions. He is

genuinely grateful and is effusive in his praise for the Philippians. Their efforts have been a source of comfort and even joy for the apostle even in the midst of his arrest and confinement.

But then he follows this thanksgiving for their prayers with the following: “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” St. Paul sees great progress in these believers. Their actions match their profession. They are growing spiritually in Christ – both in their knowledge of Him, but also in their character. They are incarnating Christ in the world. But more than this, St. Paul affirms that God will guard and keep these believers, that their growth is not finished, and that God will faithfully see them through until the day of Jesus Christ. This means, “until the end,” either the end of their lives or until Christ returns at the end of the age. Paul desires and prays for these believers that they would finish strongly, that they would not let up until they have crossed the finish line of their races.

In contrast to this, in today's gospel reading, we get an opposite sense from St. Peter. The reading begins with Peter asking Christ, “How many times should I forgive my brother? Seven times?” Here St. Peter thinks he is being gracious. “How generous of me to be willing to forgive a person seven times. Surely more than that shouldn't be required. If I've done that much, then I've done quite enough. I should not have to be further inconvenienced.” But instead of being gracious, he is actually thinking quite highly of himself. His presupposition is that his behavior is righteous enough that he himself rarely offends others, and therefore never needs gracious forgiveness from anyone else. The underlying idea here is that if we wish forgiveness from others, especially from God, then we cannot ever refuse to forgive others. Accordingly, Christ answers Peter that he must forgive others, “Seventy times seven.” Of course the point isn't to count how many times we forgive; this number is hyperbole. We must *always* forgive. There is no end to the forgiveness we owe one another. We do not get to let up at the end of the race.

The real problem here is that Peter is not accurately summing up what he owes God, the great debt of sin that God has forgiven us. Again this is not about trying to calculate some numerical value for the sins that we have committed and then figuring out what we have to do to pay that “debt.” This is not a debt in the sense of a monetary figure – how do you put a number to sin? Our debt against God is simply that we have treacherously rebelled against our Creator. Given the choice to either honor God or dishonor Him by honoring ourselves, we chose the later. We were made by God in love, and yet we have turned away from love, the free giving of ourselves to God and to each other. Through our progenitor Adam, we

we chose to up-end creation.

Now do not rail against Adam. We all individually have made ourselves out to be God, our own individual centers of our individual universes. We have betrayed our creator, and this is the fundamental sin for which no payment can be made.

Yet God forgives us our sins in Jesus Christ. All of our sins. Jesus performed the penalty of our rebellion through dying for us in His crucifixion. He paid the wages of our sins so that in Him we may die to ourselves and be made alive unto God. In Christ we may draw near to the Father because we have been reborn into the family of God. We are no longer strangers, but we are made children of God. So can any of us pretend to make an accounting of our sins? Can we get to a point where we have forgiven more than what God has forgiven us? Of course this is an absurd question.

But this was the error under which Peter was operating. He thought, "Surely, I have extended enough grace to a person if they offend me seven times and I forgive them. I should not have to forgive more than that." But Peter was underestimating the extend of God's forgiveness to himself. God's forgiveness is complete. It actually transforms us. Human forgiveness does not, cannot, approach the divine forgiveness we have in Christ thanks be to God.

Are there people in your life who constantly annoy you? Are there people in your life who have cost you, have cheated you, and who still think *you* are the one who owes *them* something? Have you ever asked for forgiveness from someone who refused to grant it? Understand that for every offense that we have endured, we have probably offended someone else. I bet everyone here remembers moments they regret – those things we wish we could take back, but cannot. We depend both on the grace of God *and* upon the grace of others to carry on. How then can we presume that we are no longer required to extend that same grace to those who constantly push us to the edge of our patience? We do not ever get to a point where we are justified in saying, "I will not forgive you." We must forgive, and forgive, and forgive, and forgive. There is no limit to how much we must forgive for there is no limit to how much God has forgiven us.

On the cross, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." But Christ knew fully that they were mercilessly torturing Him and killing Him without any justification. Still He did not call down fire from heaven to consume them. He called down forgiveness. And the deacon Stephen, the first New Testament martyr, as he was being killed by stoning followed Christ's example, "And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice,

'Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep." How many others followed their Savior Christ's example? All of the disciples except for John were martyred. "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." Also we know of Timothy, Clement, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Ignatius, Perpetua and her companions, Justin Martyr, Alban, George, the Martyrs of Lyons, Laurence, Hippolytus, Cyprian... these are just a few of the early martyrs that we celebrate. These and so many more, up through the present day even, have laid down their lives for Christ because they understood that He willingly and lovingly laid down His life for them to make them a new creation. These understood that holiness isn't something that can be put on or taken off at convenience. They persisted in their service of God all the way through the end. Their love abounded more and more, even as they followed Christ into martyrdom.

What we must understand is that all of us are named saints, and all of us are called to become what we have been named. This is not at all easy. It is humanly impossible always to extend forgiveness when we have been wronged. It is humanly impossible always to love our neighbors. We get tired and distracted and short-tempered. Let us remember that growth in holiness isn't about gritting our teeth, bearing down, and just trying harder. That will surely just make us angry and bitter. The solution to being able to love as God loves, and to forgive like the saints forgave, is to meditate upon the sufferings of Christ. He endured those sufferings for our sakes. Loving God more leads us to loving our neighbors more. And as Christians this is what we are called to. This is what it means to continually grow in grace, that our love for each other and for the world would abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that we may approve things that are excellent; that we may be sincere and without offense, not just seven times, but till the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.

This was St. Paul's prayer for the Philippians, and this is our prayer for one another. We face many dangers and struggles and sorrows in this world. It is tiring, and we may be tempted to just throw up our hands and to walk away from it all. We may give without receiving any thanks. We work to earn a living, only to be taxed to the point where it feels like we can't meet our needs. Why continue the struggle? When is enough, enough?

In the face of these questions, we hear that still small voice. "My grace is enough. My grace is sufficient for you. Do not give up. Run all the way through the finish line. For your sakes, I didn't give up, and many many many of my fellow servants, your brothers and sisters in the faith, didn't give up either."

From Hebrews 12:

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,

Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us. Strengthen us to endure the race that is set before us so that your Church would be kept well and would grow as you have appointed for it to do. May we understand Your Love for us more deeply, and understanding more, may our love for You and for our neighbors abound more and more until the day of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.