

Epiphany 4 - January 31, 2010

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“Lord, take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire for your Holy Gospel.” +Amen.

Imagine being rejected in the Temple in which you were raised as a faithful Jew. Imagine being called by God the Father to do God's will proclaiming the Kingdom of God, having just returned from retreat in the wilderness where Satan has tempted you, and returning home and being thrown out of your hometown in a rage by the people whom you trusted and knew since childhood. Such was the fate of Jesus that we read about in today's appointed Gospel. And Jesus responds, *Truly, I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown...and he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. (Luke 4)*

As I reflected upon this biblical passage, I wanted to imagine what it was like for Jesus in his humanness to have such an experience right at the moment that he was beginning the three years of his ministry that would ultimately lead to the cross and his resurrection. What did Jesus know of forgiveness at that moment?

Was this the place where he relied solely on the Father to give him the power and grace of forgiveness that only God possesses and can grant? Was this the beginning of what it means for you and me to be baptized into the forgiveness of Christ himself?

Christ alone brings lasting forgiveness: forgiveness with God, forgiveness with others, forgiveness with oneself; and ultimately, the desire for a lasting forgiveness in our hearts. Imagine forgiveness that pumps like blood through your heart to all of the people and circumstances of your life. What was it like immediately after that event for Jesus, how did he forgive and move forward? What it is to forgive the other—the one who has hurt us?

I remember meeting with a couple in Atlanta with whom I was doing some very preliminary marriage counseling. There was a crisis in the marriage where one of the parties had greatly harmed the other emotionally on several levels. This was our second meeting, when I asked the spouse who had been wronged, *Do you see the possibility of one day, after a lot of work, being able to forgive your husband?* After a long pause, she replied, *I may be able to forgive him, but I will never forget what he did.* And therein was the problem and dilemma. A wise person once said,

“It is not the bite of the snake that kills us, it is the poison if it remains within us.”

Forgiveness as painful and difficult as this may be requires a forgetting as well. There must be a loss of memory, if you will. Forgiveness is the grace that we offer the other person that claims a moving forward from that point in a brand new way. It is why Jesus as they sought to hurl him off the cliff, “passed through the midst of them and went on his way.” Are you a person who is in this kind of regular practice of forgiveness? Are you a person who can easily forgive another? Do you understand the critical need to be a forgiving person? It is actually one of the greatest gifts that you can accept from God.

African American poet and writer Langston Hughes, who lived from 1902-1967, wrote: *I, Too, Sing America*. At the heart of his poem, is the power of forgiveness: *I am the darker brother. They send me to eat in the kitchen When company comes, But I laugh, And eat well, And grow strong. Tomorrow, I'll sit at the table when company comes. Nobody'll dare Say to me, 'Eat in the kitchen.' Then. Besides, They'll see how beautiful I am And be ashamed—I, too, am America.* Hughes was able to forgive in a

way that many could never have, in a way that many of us might be incapable.

Today as well, we heard the story of the call of the prophet Jeremiah from his mother's womb. Jeremiah, too, would face great challenges to the answering of God's call. Could the key to this kind of forgiveness be found in the words of this prophet when he said, *For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:34)* There it is, the divine forgetting to which God calls you. This is heard throughout the world in the words of Christ as he spoke about his crucifixion: *I shall draw all (men and women) to myself, when I am lifted up from the earth. (John 12:33)*

Forgiveness as divine forgetting is not an easy path to walk down, especially if you have been hurt deeply by another. During this season of Epiphany, a time when we celebrate the light that God has shed upon humanity through His son Jesus Christ's coming into the world, what hurt by another toward you do you continue to cling to? Have you said to God I have forgiven him...I have forgiven her...but yet, you have not forgotten and that poison remains within? Can this be the time that you give that hurt over to the place of divine forgetting? Can you look to the example of

Christ and what he endured within his hometown of Nazareth, and say, God that is what I want—I want forgiveness to flow through my heart in all and to all.

If you are old enough, you can recall with me your early school days when it was your turn at the end of the day to wash the chalkboards. Do you remember how you wanted to wipe that slate so clean that none of the former things would show through? Imagine forgiveness in that way. **+Amen.**