

# 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year B

Fr. Samuel Springuel

28 April, 2024

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading** Acts 9:26–31

**Responsorial Psalm** Psalm 22:26–27,28,30,31–32

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading** 1 John 3:18–24

**Gospel** John 15:1–8

The need for forgiveness is a consistent message through out the Bible. In the Old Testament, the focus is on how we need God’s forgiveness, and thus it should not be surprising that this is where the Gospels start too. John the Baptist preached a “baptism for the forgiveness of sins” and the people came to him recognizing their sins, and desiring to have them washed away. Jesus himself, when he first began preaching, declared “Repent!” That is, he called people to acknowledge that they had done wrong, that they needed forgiveness, and were willing to humble themselves to ask for it. Both of these messages are in continuity with the Old Testament: God is the one doing the forgiving. Our role is “merely” to acknowledge our need for forgiveness; a task that’s hard enough on its own for us most of the time.

Jesus’s ministry, however, doesn’t remain in this mode for long. As part of one of his earliest healings, the healing of the paralytic let down through the roof by his friends, Jesus says “Your sins are forgiven.” This may not, at first, seem like such a big change from the command to repent, but Jesus is no longer calling on us to acknowledge our need for forgiveness, nor even declaring that God wants to forgive our sins. He is taking on the role of God to himself and declaring the paralytic’s sins forgiven. It is no wonder that the Pharisees who witnessed this exchange are so incensed. They would have known their Scriptures and would have known the mercy of God and his willingness to forgive sins very well, but to act in God’s place, that was much further than they were willing to go and they saw Jesus’s statement as blasphemy.

Not one to back away from controversy, Jesus not only continues to act in the role of God, declaring the sins of those he heals or otherwise helps to be forgiven, he goes further. In the Sermon on the Mount (if you follow Matthew’s setting) or the Plain (if you follow Luke’s), he instructs his followers: “Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” Two things have happened here. First, we are commanded to forgive, to take on God’s role, just as Jesus did, and be not simply recipients of forgiveness, but agents too. Second, our forgiveness, our need for forgiveness, is tied to that agency. If we are followers of Christ and have accepted his call to repentance, then we cannot simply wait to receive it. We cannot even simply

seek out Baptism or Confession and consider ourselves done. Yes, God washes away our sins in Baptism. Yes, He absolves us of our sins in Confession. I don't deny the graces of those sacraments, but if we don't put into practice the teaching to be people who forgive, not simply people who are forgiven, then we are not whole-heartedly following Christ. It is no wonder that when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, Jesus gave them the Lord's Prayer with its central petition: "forgive us our trespasses, *as* we forgive those who trespass against us."

And this is no passing thing for Jesus. Peter, grappling with the idea of taking on the role of God and being an agent of forgiveness, asks Jesus, "How often must I forgive? As many as seven times?" Seven, that's a reasonable number, isn't it? It's the Biblical number of completeness, of perfection, and yet it's also within reach. I can count "7" off on my fingers and have several to spare. Surely that's enough when it comes to taking on the role of God. But no, Jesus says, "not 7 times, but 7 times 70 times." That's 490 times if you do the math, but more significantly it's three complete, or perfect, numbers composed together: 7, 7, and 10. One might say that it is trinitarian perfection, a command to be really, truly, God-like and *never* stop forgiving. It is no wonder that Benedict declares that the Lord's Prayer should be proclaimed aloud twice daily in his monasteries in order to remind the monks to live it out in their daily lives.

And then, finally, we have Jesus's example from the Cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Even in the hardest of circumstances, Jesus shows mercy, and if we are his followers, we must do so ourselves. In this Stephen, the first martyr, followed his savior, echoing Jesus's attitude, if not his words, as he is stoned to death: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Sometimes, though, I think Stephen had it easy. Okay, perhaps not exactly "easy." When we're hurt we naturally want to call out for reprieve at the minimum, justice as the normal course of affairs, and vengeance in the most extreme cases. The Psalms themselves give evidence to this. Psalm 31 asks, "let dumbness strike [the] lying lips [of the wicked]." Psalm 37 claims that, "[the] swords [of the wicked] shall pierce their own hearts, and their bows shall be broken." Psalm 137 goes so far as to say, "Blessed the man who shall seize and smash [the] little ones [of Babylon] against the rocks." So I probably shouldn't say it was "easy" for Stephen to put aside those feelings and call for mercy on those who were killing him. But I think his act was somewhat *easier* than what we normally face. Sure, the hurt Stephen received was death, and a painful one at that: stoning. But the sheer fact that he *was dying* meant that he didn't have to face and live with his persecutors any more. He was bound for heaven. Most of us, when we are hurt, have to go on living and maybe even interacting with those who hurt us.

This is why I'm so impressed by Barnabas in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Barnabas, remember, was a very early member of the Jerusalem Church. He first appears in Acts as the prototypical example of someone who sold their goods and laid the proceeds at the Apostles' feet for the distribution to the poor. It is acts like his that created the need for deacons like Stephen. Barnabas thus likely knew Stephen, and knew him well. He probably paid a role in selecting Stephen as one of the first deacons and may very well have been among the "devout men" who buried and mourned Stephen after he was stoned.

And yet it is Barnabas who takes the initiative to bring Saul into the Jerusalem Church. Saul, the young firebrand who had guarded the cloaks of those stoning Stephen. The zealot who dragged men and women out of their houses for following the Way. The leader who convinced the high priest to issue letters authorizing him to take a group of men to Damascus and bring those who had escaped him in Jerusalem back in chains. It is no wonder that the disciples in Jerusalem were afraid of Saul when he returned from Damascus claiming a conversion to the Way. Barnabas, however, takes the risk. This man who had been so instrumental in persecuting the Church, who had, perhaps, overseen the killing of his friend. This is the man with whom Barnabas meets, listens to his story of conversion, “takes charge of,” as the reading says. This is the man he introduces to the Apostles, potentially betraying their location to someone who, not too long ago, would have used that information to see them arrested. Barnabas is taking a huge risk, but he is also following the commands of Jesus: to love one’s enemies, to forgive those who persecute you.

Now, we know how this story ends. We know that Saul becomes Paul, the great Apostle to the Gentiles and the author of nearly half of the New Testament. And so we might be inclined to excuse ourselves from following Barnabas’s example. After all, we can probably point to instances where we’ve been burned by being “too” ready forgive. Our circumstances are nothing like Barnabas’s because the people we have to forgive aren’t like Paul. But we need to remember that Barnabas didn’t know Paul when he forgave him, he knew Saul and he forgave him anyway. God calls on us to forgive regardless of whether the recipient is worthy of it or not. We are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, to forgive even those who will reject us all the way to their grave, or ours, whichever comes first. Jesus laid out the Way, Barnabas walked it. Do we have the courage to follow?