

FORGIVENESS SUNDAY
Matthew 6:14-21

By Archpriest Peter Olsen
St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY, 12189, March 17, 2024

Love is the most powerful force known to man. Many mighty armies were unable to conquer the great Roman Empire, but Christianity succeeded in toppling the Roman eagle and replacing it with the Cross without shooting a single arrow or throwing a single spear. Christianity succeeded with the power of love. In the novel *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, a convict named Jean Valjean is shown kindness by a bishop who offers him food and shelter. In the night Valjean secretly flees the bishop's residence and steals the genuine silver dinnerware that they had eaten on. Later, Valjean is arrested and brought back to the bishop in order to return the stolen silverware. The bishop tells the police that they are mistaken, that Valjean did not steal the silverware, but that the bishop had given them to him as a gift. He goes on to say to Valjean, "My friend, in your haste to leave, you forgot to take the silver candlesticks that I also gave you." The curate removes the silver candlesticks from the mantle place and puts them into Valjean's sack. The police free Valjean. The love given to Valjean by the bishop shakes Valjean to the core. Later he repents and goes on to become the mayor of the town. Having suffered from cruelty and abuse for years, the image of Christ became deeply buried within his soul. The bishop's love and kindness restored that image to the surface. Valjean is transformed from a hardened criminal into a human being radiating with the image of Christ — by the healing power of love.

Resentment breeds resentment, and it does not know what to do when confronted by love and forgiveness. Love can subdue wild beasts and is able to conquer nations. The Lord said: "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. Turn the other cheek to those who strike you. Do to all men — not as *they actually do to you* — but as *you would wish them* to do to you. Do not condemn or judge, but give and forgive. Give to those who steal, beg or borrow from you, asking nothing in return. Our Savior further says, "if we say that we love God and hate our brother, we are liars... for if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (see I John 4:20; Matthew 6:14).

How sad it is when relatives or friends no longer speak to each other because of some mistake or misunderstanding. Forgiveness is an intentional decision *to let go* of resentment and anger. Perhaps one day love will soften their hearts just enough so that they can both forgive each other and become reconciled. But during that time when stubborn egos ruled their lives, they may have forgotten that all the while time was marching on. It is impossible to recapture the years that have flown by and which are lost forever. We should cherish every precious minute of life and not waste even one moment that is here now and tomorrow will be gone. One day the clock will stop for us entirely. When that time comes, we will no longer see the face, or hear the voice, or be able to speak to those whom we loved, but because of hurt feelings we chose to hold a grudge. Maybe that person's death will stir up enough emotion within us to want to forgive and be reconciled, but then it will be too late.

Brothers and sisters, we are entering into a very special and sacred time of the year — Great Lent. If we are harboring a grudge against anyone, now more than ever is the time to swallow our egos and cast aside our self-righteousness and forgive each other our mistakes. Can any of us claim to be perfect? Every minute, every hour, every day is a precious gift from God, and we should not throw it away. We do not know what tomorrow brings, but we know what we have today. What are the goals of the spiritual struggles of Great Lent? What are we trying to achieve by our fasting, prayers, and almsgiving? Isn't it our goal to conquer pride and to learn humility? Isn't it our goal to conquer our passions? Isn't it our goal to crucify our selfishness? Isn't it our goal to grow closer to God? It is impossible for us to be able to do these things unless we first learn to forgive each other. It is impossible to have peace and

communion with God if we don't first have peace and communion with each other. Harboring resentment and remembering wrongs is like being in a prison, and forgiveness is the key which liberates us from that prison. Liberation from that prison makes us free to pray more, to allow Christ into our hearts, and it makes it possible for us to conquer our passions and to conquer our pride with humility. That is why today the Church, in her wisdom, implores us to forgive each other, so that we can move forward, and so that we may grow and profit spiritually during Great Lent. But everything is predicated on forgiveness, and it is you and I who hold the key. The question we must all ask ourselves today is: will we use that key and liberate ourselves from the cage of resentment and holding grudges and open the path to love and forgiveness? We are the only ones who have the power to use that key. No one else can use that key for us. It is up to us and us alone. May we all forgive each other from the bottom of our hearts, and may we all have a profitable Great Lent. Amen.

