

FORGIVENESS SUNDAY ~ 2022

Matt. 6:14-21

By Archpriest Peter Olsen

St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY

St. Paul exhorts us in his letter to the Ephesians to walk in a worthy manner, "with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2-3). Our Savior tells us in the Gospel of St. Matthew that if we are angry with our brother or insult our brother we are liable to judgment and the fire of hell. Our Savior goes on to say that "if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:23-24). St. Paul tells us to not let the sun go down on our anger. "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:31-32).

If we do not practice forgiveness and reconciliation, then we cannot even call ourselves Christians. Not practicing forgiveness is also an impediment to being able to receive Holy Communion. That is what the Lord means when tells us that before we can offer our gift at the altar we must first be reconciled with our brother or sister. Grieving one another can happen in many ways. It could be deliberate lies and slander out of jealousy, such as what St. Nektarios of Pentapolis and St. John Maximovitch faced from their brother bishops and clergy. It could be repeating hurtful gossip about someone. It could be a dispute about an inheritance or about money. It could be an argument about politics or religion, both sensitive subjects. These are only a few examples among countless reasons why brother and brother, sister and sister, brother and sister, mother or father and son or daughter, friends, fellow parishioners, anyone who we call neighbor, can have a dispute or grievance. If we grieve someone else, then we must quickly ask them to forgive us, because our salvation depends upon it. How can we expect the Lord to forgive us our sins when we do not forgive each other? If someone else grieves or hurts us, do not be angry and harbor hatred, but instead, respond with patience, love, tolerance and forgiveness. Remember that it is the demons who inspire the disruption of harmony, unity and brotherly love between us and our neighbors. Being angry hurts no one but ourselves. Giving in to anger is like swallowing poison. If we don't vomit it out and get rid of it, it will literally kill us, both physically and spiritually.

Tomorrow we will embark upon a very sacred and special journey ~ Great Lent. Before doing so, it is fitting and proper that we clear the air with everyone and begin with a clean slate, with all of our neighbors, that we forgive everyone who has grieved us, and that we ask forgiveness from everyone whom we have grieved. Even if we sincerely meant no harm but something we said unwittingly hurt someone's feelings, the humble Christian thing to do is to still ask for forgiveness. It doesn't matter whether hurting someone's feelings was deliberate or not. Unfortunately it is part of the human condition that from time to time we grieve one another. Forgiving and asking forgiveness is a daily and continuous process throughout the entire year ~ every day, every hour, and even every minute. During vespers today the vestment colors will be changed from gold to purple, and our church hymnology and melodies will reflect an attitude of deep sorrow for our sins as we enter this special season of repentance. At the end of vespers we have the special rite of forgiveness in the Orthodox Church. We will individually and mutually ask forgiveness of each other, asking forgiveness and receiving forgiveness from every one in church today before we go home. And we must likewise ask forgiveness and seek reconciliation outside of church with *anyone* whom we no longer speak to because we have ill feelings towards each other. I know a mother and son who did not speak to each other for seven years. Thankfully, they were eventually reconciled, but those seven years of silence can never be recovered. I know of two sisters who for twenty-eight years have ceased to have a relationship with each other. Life is very short. Why would anyone want to

spend any part of this short life by depriving themselves of speaking with and having a relationship with someone that they love? Because the devil has arranged this foolishness and the devil rejoices when he sees this. Don't let the devil ruin our lives and make fools of us. Forgive one another and be reconciled, and don't let the sun go down on your anger. Good fast! Good Lent! And good Pascha! Amen.

