

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on March 5, 2017	On the occasion of the First Sunday in Lent, A

You Are Forgiven!

God loves you.

On Ash Wednesday I invited people to spend Lent basking in God's infinite love for them. Like lying in the sun and being surrounded by its warmth, the love of God should surround us, and warm us, and fill us with a sense of God's presence and perfect love for us. And like the sun, God's perfect love can make visible the shadows in our own souls. When we enter into the nearer presence of God, we become acutely aware of our own shortcomings. That is natural, as we naturally compare our sinfulness to God's lack of sin. This creates a kind of cognitive dissonance. We believe that God loves us, while at the same time perhaps question how God could love us. We feel like we do not deserve God's love. We have sinned. We have fallen short of the Glory of God. How could God look past that to love a sinful creature when sin is the opposite of God?

This is a very serious question. Fortunately, there is a simple answer. God forgives you.

I say that it is simple. What I mean is that it is simply stated. Forgiveness is hardly a simple thing.

Just think about the process of forgiveness. First, it is necessary to recognize that there is something to forgive. Judgment comes first. God first judges us guilty of sin. Then, because this is about repairing a relationship, and therefore it is a dynamic process of back and forth, we must recognize that we have done something wrong. Because we are imperfect and finite, we need help with this. The Holy Spirit has a way of revealing our sins to us. It's called conviction. That's when we become conscious of our sin; we are convicted, so to speak. It's no fun.

It's no place to get stuck either. If we never get beyond simply being aware of our sin, then we devolve into a self-absorbed, guilt-ridden mess. We may become self-destructive, or we may act out and hurt those around us. It is at this moment that it is convenient for us to be told, or reminded, of the Good News, that God loves us. If we are able to keep that in mind, we begin to wonder what we can do with our sense of guilt. There is something you can do with your guilt. Repent.

Both biblical words for repent, in Hebrew and Greek, literally mean to turn, to change direction. To repent is to consciously take a different path. Repentance is itself a process. It involves confession, contrition, asking for and accepting God's forgiveness. You might reasonably ask: why do we have to confess our sins to God? Doesn't God already know our sins? Of course God knows our sins. Still it is important for us to openly acknowledge them, so that God knows that we know our sins, and that we are truly, actively seeking forgiveness, rather than just presuming on God's mercy. There's more to confession than that. It is a very basic human need to confess. Sometimes we just need to put it into words to make it real to us. Sometimes it's important to speak it out loud to another person. That's why I'm here, to act as God's ears when it is needed. That's why the seal of the confession is absolute. It goes directly to God, even though I am standing in for God in that moment. It is not about me, or my relationship with you. I am only an instrument in this grace filled process.

Contrition goes along with confession. Contrition is about more than just feeling bad about your sin. It can be about trying to make things right, trying to make amends for the wrong you have done. That may involve trying to reconcile with another person. It may involve trying to make up for the consequences of your sin. Contrition might be about changing your life in significant ways, changing habits, changing the people you associate with, changing the places

you go. I don't think contrition is really about trying to prove to God how sorry you are for your sin, it is more about rejecting the wrong and embracing the right. It is about amendment of life. It is about committing yourself to follow God's ways.

Along with confession and contrition, it is important for us to ask God for God's forgiveness. Not because God is just waiting for us to ask. God was willing to forgive us long before we were even aware of our sin. But to ask for forgiveness is an act of humility. It says to God, and to us, that we are not the center of the universe, that God is the authority to whom we are accountable, and that we are subject to God's mercy. Humility is a tough one for us. Our society does not reward humility. It rewards self-confidence, self-determination, and self-aggrandizement. Humility makes you look, and perhaps feel, like a chump. That's probably why it's so important for us to be humble before God and to ask for forgiveness, because we have such tendencies in the opposite direction. We must constantly remind ourselves of our place in relation to God, that we are but dust and to dust we shall return.

Finally, and most importantly, we must accept the forgiveness that God offers. Really that's what this whole process is about that I'm talking about. This process is not about earning God's forgiveness, or proving anything to God. We couldn't possibly be good enough to do that, and it's not necessary. This process is about us fully claiming and living into the forgiveness that God freely offers us. Without some kind of process we couldn't fully comprehend the gracious gift that God gives. Being as concrete as we humans are, we need to go through these steps in order to get it. God understands that, not just because God created us, but because God's own Son entered into this world and took on human flesh. He lived a full human life, complete with temptation. Jesus is God's merciful hand outstretched to us, and all we need to do is take that

hand. We do that through this process of forgiveness: conviction, repentance, confession, contrition, asking for and accepting God's forgiveness.

Sometimes the hardest part of accepting God's forgiveness is forgiving our self. It is often easier to forgive someone else who has wronged you than it is to forgive yourself for something you have done. Just who do we think we are anyway? If God is willing to forgive us, and we are not willing to accept that forgiveness and forgive our self, then we place our self above God. There is great humility in accepting forgiveness too. It isn't easy to forgive yourself, but just remember what Jesus went through on your behalf, and remember that you do not need to crucify yourself. If you did, then what would be the point of Jesus facing the cross for you? Don't undo the good that Jesus did and withhold forgiveness from yourself. You make a mockery of his sacrifice, if you do that.

The real point of all this is to be reconciled to God and to be thankful for all of God's gifts, forgiveness being chief among them. This Lent I invite you to contemplate the fact that God loves you, and God forgives you.

Amen.