

Christ Church, Dartmouth
Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Kyle Wagner
September 13, 2020

In today's readings, we touch upon our judgment of one another, and that we all stand before God, who scripture says is our maker. As a society we sin against one another, and Jesus' challenge in the gospel is that we are to forgive seventy-seven. Such a number reveals God's boundless mercy and love. When we hear the words of forgiveness in worship and sign ourselves with the cross, we are indeed renewed in baptism to be signs of reconciliation in the world. This is something we as a parish need to be striving for, and something the world so desperately needs.

I am indeed back from holiday, feeling refreshed and renewed. Julie, the boys and I spent three great weeks at our family cottage in Fernwood, PEI.

One of the things I did while I was at the cottage was some work around the property for my mother. Well, I must say, Julie did much of it; she's a pro. Kitchen taps were replaced, a woodstove line replaced, and new electrical sockets installed, all done by my wonderful life partner. I did, though, look at the grounds of the property and had my chainsaw out, trimming trees. One of the things that I attempted to do was to begin to remove some old tree stumps on the property. Years ago, my father planted the trees to create a sort of property line as our lot is the last one on the road, but there is a possibility of future development. These spruce trees where mosquitoes infested and the bane of my existence as a young boy. Each time I had to cut the lawn, I felt the wrath of God's creation, pesky mosquitos! I found out this summer that they still serve as a frustration.

The trees which died had been cut down, and what is left is just the tops of the stumps. Not only are ants taking hold, but the stumps seem to serve as a speed bump or barrier for cars that park at the cottage. My uncle, who ran over a stump with his Mercedes, loudly said the stumps should be removed. In preparation for removing the stumps, I marked them with orange spray paint so that they may be more visible to guests. I planned to remove them with a pickaxe, and as I began the process, I quickly found out that often what we see is not always what is there or true. I quickly discovered that removing the stumps will be a huge project because what lies underneath each tree is a series of roots that branch out into the lawn. These small trees needed generous support as they did not only go down but across for more stability.

So, what I thought was an easy and quick job, turns out to be a process that I will do in the spring as I wait for the ground to be soft, wet, and moist so that I can get at the branches easier. I realized that what I saw on the outside was not what was present. What is seen, is not always felt. One could also look at the image of the iceberg and how the tip is just a fraction of what lies underneath.

Jesus, in our gospel today, talks to us about sin and forgiveness. Paul tells us to stop judging one another. Of course, we have heard the phrase "to err is human, to forgive is divine!" How true these readings reign today during this pandemic. The summer is gone, we are now into fall, school is back in some form, many of us are back from holiday. Yet, there's no real feeling of

“we’re back.” Many of us are not ready to return to in person worship and connecting through online forms is something we will continue.

One of the significant challenges we have is the difficult decisions the church has to make in order to transform and grow. We are navigating new waters, something the church has not faced in a century. As such, it is only natural that not all may agree with certain decisions. And when we become wounded, we often react quickly. We don’t pause, we don’t reach out, we don’t listen. Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?” Such a question shows that Peter knows that this happens to frequently. God’s family is not perfect. You see, forgiveness takes us from the separation of others to carrying out God’s mission together. So how often are we to forgive? Well, let’s look at what Jesus says.

A single talent was fifteen years’ wages, so ten thousand was unimaginable money: a “gazillion” dollars. Such a vast description by Christ gives a challenge to forgiveness. And we have the debt language in our Lord’s Prayer, don’t we? “forgive us our debts.” Seventy-seven also plays with the ancient idea that seven is the number of fullness and perfection. Because seven combines three, a number that suggests divinity, and four, recalling the corners of the flat earth. So, with seventy-seven, Jesus multiplies the number of total perfection. So, we should always forgive.

As you know, we are in the period of discernment as we have set sail on Vision 2020. I hope that after we complete this process, we will indeed have 20/20 Vision! (Do you like how I did that!). This process requires all of us to share our voices. Often when a community or an organization faces challenges, it’s when people have differences. For a critical piece of work within a corporation or a church to be influential folks need to be honest with one another, respectful, and engaged. If you need to enter into reconciliation with a friend or family member, perhaps now is the time to ready one’s self.

This coming week you will receive a message from our parish visioning ministry committee. I have also written a letter. This week we take the first step in our journey as we are all asked to complete a survey. This survey is vital in gathering information for our future conversations. It is anonymous, so I encourage everyone to be as honest and open as you can. Take the time, reflect, pray as you fill out the form. I have already had many parishioners share with me their vision for Christ Church. Some of us though, may be shy in expressing our opinions. Now is the time. Your opinions matter and are key.

As I end this morning, I want us to recognize that we are all hurting as humans in various ways, and for various reasons. What we see on the outside is not what is on the inside. What stumps are visible, don’t always show the roots underneath. So, let’s gather together; let’s hold one another, and let us forgive as we seek to vision together. Seventy-seven. AMEN.