

- God has granted us all that we can pass on one to the other so that the slightest little thing can ignite the hurt and open the wound all over again. Thus, we have polite worshipers on a Sunday morning, not necessarily loving, committed worshipers on Sunday mornings. This behavior inspires not only us as individuals, but it also inspires and is used by nations. After barbaric and inhumane behavior between countries, we see nations sit down at the negotiating table to sign treaties in a noble tribute to be reconciled. It's going on right now in the Middle East as there is an attempt for Israel and Lebanon to work out their differences, but perhaps there's hope because at least they're saying there are some terms that are not comfortable, and we aren't sure we're making progress. It takes a little bit longer at the negotiating table. Those very same truces that are signed very quickly are violated frequently before the ink is even dry when countries have not forgiven before reconciliation is attempted. To hasten reconciliation without allowing the two sides to unveil and examine their wounds in the open, before one another, to confess their pain, to forgive the making of those wounds, is futile. It is like a patch-up gesture doomed to allow the original hurt to fester again, and in short order, and burst out with even greater violence. Such desperation has led to massacres, like the one of Nat Turner and John Brown. Such haste in reconciliation has led to the riots of the '60s, to guerrilla tactics in Central America, to terrorism and even war. Peace in families, friendships and nations is a costly business dear friends, but what is the price that you and I must pay? It is a pause that really is uncommon behavior, but which is necessary before trust and love can take root. And that price is the simple act of forgiveness. The need for forgiveness is pervasive and it is constant. Where it is present, there is a quality of life that is tensionless, it is graceful. Where forgiveness is absent, there is gnarled, there are gnarled and hardened lives which are undergirded by self righteous behavior or people who slush around in self pity. The need for forgiveness was pervasive that day, that day of blood revenge for ancient Israel, which you heard read about in Second Samuel. Abner recognized the need due to his own situation, his own pain and his hurt pride. He had clearly lost the battle. He had nowhere to hide. Abner was the commander of Saul's army. After King Saul had died, Abner brought his son, Ish-bosheth to Mahanaim and made him king over Israel, all of Israel. Accept that David had been secretly anointed by Samuel and had gained his kingdom Juda, by diplomacy and force. The people, God's chosen people, were divided and at each other's throats. The throne of David was established at Hebron with this House of Judah. Though Ish-bosheth is set up as the successor of Saul and is legally the king, everyone knows that Abner is the power behind the throne. For two years, Ishmosheff reigns and his reign is nothing compared to what David has done, for now a period of seven years, a sort of duel takes place between Abner and Joab and it happens at Gibeon, and it develops into a full-scale war. Three of the sons of Zaria are there, Joab, Abishai and Asael. Asael is the one who is the youngest and who could run the fastest, and he knew that as Abner was retreating, he could catch him and that he would, indeed, kill him. In his youthfulness, he had forgotten that he was not an expert soldier, so that he did not live very long. Two of this trio of brothers will be very important in the reign of David, but in this ensuing conflict, Asael is killed by an unwilling Abner, who knew the family and did not want to kill one of these brothers. He and Joab were good friends. He knew that he would have to deal with the blood vengeance of Asael's brother, and he begged him, go away, go kill some other soldier, leave me alone, for I will have to destroy you. An uncommon thing happened for two nations

in conflict. There is a truce that happens between Joab and Abner which puts an end to the this first conflict in which David is the victim. How does this happen? What is the price that was paid for this moment of apparent reconciliation? With a great deal of courage, with tucked pride and apparent cowardice and obvious defeat, Abner gathers all of his army behind him on a hill and he stops the action by calling out to Joab. It was uncommon behavior, no one ever did that in the midst of battle. But he stops and he says, "Shall the sword devour forever? "Do you not know that the end will be bitter? "How long will it be before you bid your people to turn from the pursuit of their brothers?" And Joab could hear. He said, "As God lives, if you had not spoken, "surely these men would have fought till morning and obviously they would have won." So Joab blew the trumpet and all the men stopped and pursued Israel no more. For a brief moment in the history of ancient Israel, two men recognized the importance of the pause that refreshes, to examine the hurt, the pain, the consequences of resentment, jealousy, anger. Two men stopped to consider the power and the possibility that both could forgive. It is not an easy thing to do. The practice of forgiveness is a harder thing to do than the theory we talk about. I'm sure some of you know the evangelist, Corrie ten Boom. She has written a book called "The Hiding Place," and she tells the story of the time after her release from a concentration camp where her sister Betsy had died. Corrie had preached all over Europe about the need to forgive one's enemies. And after she had finished a service one day, she was greeting worshipers at the back of the church and as she greeted one particular man, she recognized that it was the SS guard at the shower room in the processing room at Ravensbruck. She says, "How grateful I am to remember this time," for the man said to her, "I thank you Corrie, "for your message. "To think that as you say, Jesus has washed my sins away." "Suddenly, it was all there," Corrie said. "The room full of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, "the pain, the face of my sister Betsy. "His hand was stretched out to me to shake it "and I who had preached so often "to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, "kept my hand at my side. "I could not raise it even as angry, "vengeful thoughts raced through my mind," she says, "I saw the sin of my own actions. "Jesus had died for this man. "Was I going to require more? "I tried to smile, but nothing would come. "I struggled to raise my hand and I could not. "I felt nothing, not the slightest spark "of warmth or charity, and so again, "I breathed a silent prayer. "Jesus, I cannot forgive him. "Give me your forgiveness. "As I took his hand, a most incredible thing happened. "From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand, "a current seemed to pain or pour from me to him "while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger "that almost overwhelmed me, and I discovered that it is not "our forgiveness anymore than it is our goodness "that the world's healing hinges, "but rather it is Jesus' forgiveness." When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, He gives along with the command the love we need to accomplish the task. In the presence and the power of Christ, pains and hurts which loom so large within our being become smaller and more manageable. The truth is that many of us in this sanctuary this morning who call ourselves Christian, do not take the time to forgive. The pain of the hurt is so deep, the connecting anger, the hatred or resentment so profound, that forgiveness doesn't seem to be likely or even a possibility. Non-forgiveness is the only reasonable way. After all, not to forgive honors my emotions. I'm angry and I honor that. It affirms the pain and it's after effects. It looks after me, the damaged person. If I don't forgive, I'm going to protect myself. Forgiveness is on the other hand, unreasonable as is life and as God also seems to be sometimes, for you see, children die. Husbands leave their wives and wives leave their husbands. Old people die lonely, floods wipe out communities. Volcanoes erupt and destroy cities and towns, and God appears to somehow allow these tragedies to occur without interfering or intervening what is ultimately within God's control. It is unreasonable, yet it is only the persons who experience and survive the unreasonableness of life who can

understand the unreasonableness of forgiveness. It is only as we endure and risk and live into and through our pain that we begin to understand the mystery that is forgiveness. Humans tend to avoid that which we do not understand or which remains a mystery. People don't forgive when the pain is new and deep. It is not easy to love our neighbors when we are hurting. It is a goal to work towards, but it requires practice and exercise to plain, strategies to reach and support from a community such as the body of Christ, the church, to sustain. We cannot do it by ourselves. Non-forgivers, however, deny this goal. I don't need anybody. I go to church and I worship and I'm clear, I worship God. Those people who worship with me really don't matter, says the non-forgiver. But forgivers move beyond the pain to forgiveness and healing of relationship, for as we share our pain, one with the other and we lift it up and help each other bear our burdens, we find that we are also strengthened. There are other reasons people don't forgive. Anger, jealousy, resentment, revenge, because it isn't the socially acceptable thing to do. We may ask ourselves, who isn't out of fashion to forgive? The list varies from century to century. In Jesus' Day, the list included the tax collectors and the prostitutes. Nowadays, the tax collector and the prostitutes almost appear to be angels for more than these are the welfare cheats, the dope pushers, the abortionists, the environmental polluters, the terrorists, child and spouse abusers, sexual deviants. These are the people whom we do not forgive. Just suppose God gave these folks a second chance. I wonder if you and I would be like Jonah and have a kind of Ninevehnitus, I call it, that resented the facts that God would dare to have mercy on all human beings, regardless of their plight in life. We also find ourselves unwilling to forgive. Persons who are not dealt with forgivingly are dealt with punitively. For you see, if we don't forgive, it means that I'm gonna punish you. You're gonna pay for what you did to me. Once we deal punitively with others, then we eliminate the possibility for forgiveness. Many of us do not forgive because there's an easier way. I'll just pretend you don't exist, I never knew you. I will just cut you right out of my life and I will go on. How can, we might ask a Winnie Mandela, forgive the South African government for barring her from her home and family, for imprisoning her husband. How can she forgive? How can mothers of the homelands forgive a people who forced them to watch their babies die and stripped them of the love and the meaning of family life as their menfolk are absent from them? How can the people in Nicaragua and El Salvador forgive those who forced them from their homes, who kidnapped family members, who killed their relatives, who torture their loved ones? How can the people of Palestine and Israel forgive those whom they despise and resent so intensely? How can the family forgive the terrorists that randomly killed their 12-year-old daughter in an airport in Rome? How can the women in America, especially women of color, forgive a government, a social system, a society which feminizes the dregs of poverty, that starves their children and makes families homeless, unhealthy and desperate? How can my black sons forgive a society which denies him a chance to work even on the brink of the 21st century because of the color of his skin? The church is the place where we must come to find a way to take that pause that refreshes, renews, restores and heals all of this wretched brokenness. The church must find ways to pry out, on their behalf, and our own, dear Lord, forgive. Forgive us that we may forgive. The church can aptly make such a cry. Christianity destroyed the barriers which came from birth and nationality, from ceremony and ritual, from the cultured and the un-cultured, between class, between those things which drive us apart. For we are told there is no slave or free, no Jew or Greek, for we all are children of God. In the presence of God, social distinctions of the world become irrelevant. In Colossians, Paul reaffirms that all are God's chosen people. There is no most favored nation in God's economy. If we dared to think that we are superior or better than another, we have fooled ourselves, for God treats each of us and loves each of us equally. There are no virtues listed in this passage read to you in

Colossians 3 this morning, that deal with things such as efficiency, decency, order, cleverness, diligence and industry. Those aren't the things that Paul lists as essential graces that you and I as Christians must own, but each of the graces and virtues that he talks about has to do with personal relationships. I invite you to go home and read Colossians 3 for yourselves. The basic Christian virtues govern and set the tone of human relationships. Christianity is community. Christianity on the divine side provides for you and me the amazing gift of peace and oneness with God, a transcendent being. On the human side, we have the triumphant solution of the problem of living together as human beings, as different as we are. Among these five virtues which Paul mentions that Christians must have in relationships, is forbearance and a forgiving spirit. The Christian must forbear and forgive, never forgetting that we have also been forgiven. As God forgives us, so we must forgive others. The perfect example of such forgiveness, or bond of this forgiveness is based upon love, for love holds the whole Christian body together. We may not like another, but we must love another. We must let the peace of God be the decider in our hearts. The Greek word used here as decider, means umpire. We must let Jesus be the umpire, if you will, in our heart. The Greek word is a verb from the athletic arena, used of the umpire who settles things with his decisions in any matter of dispute. If the peace of Jesus Christ is the umpire in your heart and mind when feelings clash and when we are pulled in two directions at the same time, Christian kindness conflicts in our hearts with un-Christian irritation and annoyances. The decision of Christ will keep us in the way of love and the church will then be able to remain the one body it is meant to be. The way to right action is for you and me to appoint Jesus Christ as the arbiter between the conflicting emotions in our hearts and minds. Paul finally reminds the church at Colossae, "In all you do and say, do so in the name of Christ." There is no way we can hold our grudges, our anger, our resentment, our pain even, and say we do it in the name of Christ. Every time we will acknowledge that we have lied to ourselves. We are told that we must always remember not only who we are, but more importantly, whose we are. On this last Sunday in 1985, friends, as you leave this place pondering the needs for you to forgive others and the need to be forgiven, I would ask you to make this resolve. Wherever and whatever you do or say, do it in the name of Christ, and even find the time. Take the pause that refreshes, renews, restores. Take the time to receive your forgiveness and to extend forgiveness to others. Let us pray. Dear God, in the name of your son Jesus, we ask you to have mercy upon us as individuals, as families. And as this congregation gathers and as Christians gather all over the world worshiping in your Son's name this morning, show all of us dear God, the way we must take. Give us the courage we need that we may pause and examine the things that make our lives the way they are. Have us dear God, to take the time and acknowledge the places that need to be healed, and then dear God, give us the wisdom to in fact pause and forgive. Dear God, we thank you that you have already forgiven us as we claim it then, let us be the vessels for the flow through of your love to others that they too, may know the good news of your son Jesus for their lives as we know it for our very own. We pray these things because indeed you have loved us. Let the people of God say Amen. (organ playing) (people singing hymn)

- Let us affirm our faith. I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. The third day he rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen. The Lord be with you.

- And also with you.

- Let us pray. Oh God, who has come among us in the babe of Bethlehem, we thank thee for Christmas, for gifts given and gifts received, for family gatherings in which those separated gather again, for letters and cards from those whom we have not heard for long. We give thee thanks, oh gracious God, for the spirit of goodwill, which is all through the land. For this time when people remember, if only for a little while, that it is more blessed to give than it is to receive, for this time when people find happiness in bringing happiness to others, we give thee thanks. Oh God, bless those for whom there has been little joy at this Christmas time. We think of those who are aged and alone, those who have no one left to remember them, to send them gifts or cards. Bless those who have lost someone dear this past year, who at Christmas time are very conscious of the one who is not there. Bless those who are poor and who hurt, not just for themselves but for all the gifts they long to give but cannot. Bless those who are ill and who must spend this time of joy in sickness or pain, especially those nearby in Duke Hospital. Bless those who are far home and far from friends, who are lonely and homesick among strangers in a strange place, especially the international student community here at Duke. Bless those who feel their loneliness and their loss more keenly than ever in this time of fellowship and joy. Oh God, send thy spirit among thy people this Christmastide. Make this a season when those who have quarreled will be reconciled and may they learn to forgive. Make this a time when those who have drifted apart, will find each other again. Make this a time when sons and daughters who rebelliously left home, will come back home and will find a welcome waiting for them. And also we pray for grieving families of those so senselessly killed in Rome and in Vienna. For those who've died in South African violence, and all others, victims of injustice and cruelty. Remembrance of them in our prayers makes us mindful of the one who entered into a humble home and took our life upon Him that He might bring us peace. Grant, oh Lord, in this Christmastime that Christ may be born again in our hearts, for thy love's sake. Amen. And now as a people to whom many good gifts have been given, let us offer ourselves and our gifts to God for God's work. (orchestra playing) (organ playing) (choir singing hymn)

- Gracious God, we thank you for all the gifts of this life, particularly for the gift of thy dear son, Jesus the Christ, born among us and for the gift of forgiveness which enables us to give and to forgive others. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. (orchestra playing) (organ playing) (choir singing hymn)

- Now may the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you and remain with you always. Amen. (organ playing)