

- Duke University Chapel. Duke university Chapel service of worship. Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 12th, 1977, 11 o'clock. (soft hymn music)

- Your word is near oh Lord, our God, your grace is near. Come to us then with mildness and power, do not let us be deaf to you, but make us open and receptive that we may worship you in spirit and in truth. Amen. (hymn music) We deceive ourselves, but not God when we say we have no need to make confession of our sins. With the assurance that we can be forgiven and be made whole, let us now make our corporate confession. We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength, we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves, we have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven. (congregation responds indistinctly) We have been deaf to your call to serve as Christ served us, we have not been true to the mind of Christ, we have grieved your Holy Spirit. (congregation responds indistinctly) Our self indulgent appetites and ways, and our exploitation of other people. (congregation responds indistinctly) Our negligence in prayer and worship, and our failure to commend the faith that is in us. (congregation responds indistinctly) For all faults judgments, for uncharged thoughts toward our neighbors and for our prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us. (congregation responds indistinctly) For our waste and pollution of your creation and our lack of concern for those who come after us. (congregation responds indistinctly) Restore us good Lord. (congregation responds indistinctly) And now let us make our personal confession. Amen. Remember and believe the words from the first letter of John. If we confess our sins, God is just, and may be trusted to forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrong. Accept this forgiveness and give thanks for this hope, which is ours, amen. (hymn music) Hear the old Testament reading 2nd Samuel. When the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah, her husband was dead, she made limitation for her husband. And when the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house. And she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord. And the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, "There were two men on a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing, but one little ewe lamb, which he had brought. And he brought it up and it grew with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his bosom. And it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man. And he was unwilling to take one off his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him. But he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man and said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die. And he shall restore the lamb fourfold because he did this thing and because he had no pity." Nathan said to David, "You are the man." "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hands of Saul, and I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your bosom, and I gave you the house of Israel and of Judah, and if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. Why have you despised the word of the Lord to do what is evil in his sight? You have smitten Uriah, the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have slain him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah, the Hittite to be your wife." David said to

Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin. You shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed, you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die." Then Nathan went to his house. Let us stand for the reading of the gospel lesson. Hear the reading from Luke. One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him. And he went into the Pharisee's house and sat at the table, And behold, a woman of the city who was a sinner, when she learned that he was sitting in the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of anointment and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wipe them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the anointment. Now, when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, if this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him for she is a sinner. And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "What is it, teacher?" "A certain creditor had two debtors. One owed 500 denarii, the other 50. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now, which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one I suppose to whom he forgave more." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman?" "I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in, she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins which are many are forgiven for she loved much, but he who is forgiven little, loves little." And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you, go in peace." Here ends the reading of the gospel lesson. (hymn music) Let us affirm what we believe. We believe in God who has created and is creating, who has come in the truly human Jesus to reconcile and make new, who works in us and others by the spirit, we trust God who calls us to be the church, to celebrate life and its fullness, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus crucified and risen, our judge and our hope in life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us, we are not alone, thanks be to God. The Lord be with you. (congregation responds indistinctly) Let us pray. Oh, holy God, we bow before you in all and adoration, we are overcome with a sense of our affinity to you when we consider your greatness, your majesty, your power and your utter mystery. We give thanks for your love which cares for us in spite of our mistakes and our sin. We give thanks for the beauty of your creation, the glory of your world. We give thanks for your loving concern which is shown to us through our friends, our family, and through strangers, and especially through your church. Oh God, hear now our prayers of intercession. For those who have difficult decisions to make which affect the lives of other people, give to them wisdom and compassion. For those persons who are solely troubled and disturbed with burdens which seem too much for any human to bear, comfort and sustain them in their time of need. For those persons who are hungry, homeless, jobless, lonely, lost, bring to fruition the work of your people seeking to make all people whole. Hear our prayers for those who are working to bring about justice and order and righteousness in our country and in the whole world, give to them courage and truth and perseverance to see their work completed. Hear our prayers for all people who serve you, that we may be obedient to your will, that we may use our time, our energies, our creativity to further your kingdom. Hear our personal prayers for those who are sick. We pray for your support for all persons who work to care for and heal those who are sick in mind and body and spirit. And know God, we would be dishonest if we did not admit our personal needs. We pray that this will be a time for spiritual growth, a time when we will be renewed, and a time to dedicate ourselves again to the work of

your son, our savior, Jesus the Christ who taught us to pray. 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. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, amen. We welcome you who joined us today, especially those who joined us every Sunday to worship in this chapel. As you know, much work goes into preparing for our service of worship, we have one special request. Any of you who would be willing to help us usher on Sunday mornings, would you leave your name at the desk at the back of the chapel when the service is over, we need your help. It's our special privilege to borrow a fellow pastor from St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Bob Johnson, to preach to us today. We welcome him and open our hearts and our minds to hear the word that you bring to us today. Welcome.

- In the name of God, amen. I'm not quite sure how or why the duke preaching fairy came up with me as your preacher for this service, but I'm glad that he or she did. It's a pleasure to be in this beautiful place, and it's fun to be worshiping God with you today. I discovered last week that preparing a sermon for people I don't know, is like composing a letter to whom it may concern, and I suspect that hearing a sermon by someone you don't know is like receiving a letter addressed to occupant. And we all know what happens to occupant letter. To me, a sermon is a personal event and the possibilities for excitement and for power are greater when the participants in that event know one another. So I have pretended to know you, who you are, where you're hurt, what's going on in your life. And if what I say is not what you need to hear, then you will know that in my imagination, I have confused you with somebody else. I am constrained today to talk about forgiveness. Constrained because the lectionary now shared by Methodists and Episcopalians and Presbyterians and Lutherans and Roman Catholics and United Church Christians and anybody else who wants to read it, that lectionary makes forgiveness the star attraction today. Isn't it interesting that of the two activities Jesus was most famous for, it was the forgiving that got him into trouble. The healing wasn't much of a problem. People seem to enjoy watching that. There was a little grumbling about Jesus healing after office hours and about some of the house calls he made, but for the most part, the healing was rather uncontroversial. But the forgiving, that was something else. Every time Jesus forgave a sinner, he had a fight on his hand. Apparently people then were like people now, they were very stingy with God's forgiveness, unless they themselves were the direct recipients. What I'm going to do is first, describe the value of God's forgiveness to people like you and me. And second, investigate why if forgiveness is such good stuff, more people don't want it. From the Old Testament lesson this morning, we have heard the story of God's forgiving King David for adultery and for murder. And from the New Testament, we heard the story of Jesus forgiving a sinful woman at a Pharisee's dinner party. We are not told specifically what her sin was, but it too is implied to be a rather notorious sin of the flesh. In both stories, the guilty person acknowledges responsibility for the sin, gives evidence of repentance, and is pronounced forgiven in the eyes of God. And it is God whose opinion matters. It's important for believers to remember that. David showed great insight when Nathan confronted him with his own wickedness, "I have sinned against the Lord." David says. One man is dead, David has taken the dead man's wife and the life of a newborn child is threatened. And still David says, "I have sinned against the Lord." You see the biblical position is that all sin is against the Lord. It injures people, but it's against the Lord. It hurts us, it hurts people around us, but it is against God. Adultery and murder were the evidences, the symptoms of David's sin. The real sin was in being untrue to the vocation God gave him, being careless and unfaithful with God's trust, deciding to resign from God's

symphony and make his own kind of music. We know the name of that tune, don't we? We know every note of it by heart. God invites us to be the melody in his great harmonious symphony, and instead we whip out our comb and paper kazooos and say, no thanks, we make our own music and isn't it beautiful. Both David and the woman at the dinner party were willing to graduate from kazoo to symphony. They acknowledged their own responsibility. They regretted their error, they were pronounced forgiven. This process of acknowledgement, repentance and forgiveness has always been valued highly by spiritually sensitive people. Forgiveness from God for one wrong choice or for a whole life of wrong choices has always been a dream, a hope, a gift to be cherished. Old Jeremiah had this gift in mind when he predicted, "The days are coming," says the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with my people, I will forgive their iniquity, I will remember their sin no more." That possibility, the forgiven unremembered sin is so important that it's an article of faith in the Apostles Creed, right there along with the communion of saints, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting, I believe in the forgiveness of sin, I believe in the possibility of a clean slate, a fresh start, a new direction. This possibility has been crucial in my own personal history. And I perceive it to be crucial to others too. No wonder Jesus said to a young man one time, "Son be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven." The chance for a new beginning is enough to cheer us up. One of the things Jesus did most frequently and most publicly was to forgive those whom everybody else had given up on. And that forgiveness almost always resulted in a new player for the symphony and an old kazoo traded in. I think I can argue convincingly that the most important task the church of Jesus Christ has is to continue his ministry of God's forgiveness. It is only by being forgiven that we experience ourselves as valuable to God. And only when we know ourselves valuable, does it matter really how we live. So if forgiveness is such a great gift, why doesn't everybody want it? Why aren't people aligned up at our churches and synagogues to get in and get some? I can think of two reasons why God's forgiveness is not very high on the charts these days. First, we have been told so many times recently by so many well-mannered and well-meaning people that we don't really need to be forgiven that we may be beginning to believe it. What we really need we are told is to understand and accept ourselves as we really are. We need to have our behavior explained to us so thoroughly that we know precisely what motivates us to think and do what we think and do. And when we are completely understood by ourselves and by others, we don't need to be forgiven because we can see exactly why we are the way we are. And understanding why we are that way somehow excuses us for being that way. I've whistled that tune several times and I just cannot make it fit into the symphony. It doesn't go there. Without belittling or denying the least in the least, the value of self discovery and understanding and self acceptance, the fact still remains that understanding and explaining why I am a scoundrel does not change the fact. And furthermore, it does not remove my responsibility for being one. I can be a perfectly explained, completely understood scoundrel, but a scoundrel just the same. What I need is to have my scoundrel illness challenged, to acknowledge my responsibility for it, and to have it forgiven. Until it's forgiven, I cannot leave it. So if you really want to help me, don't excuse me, don't explain me away, take me seriously and hold me accountable. The second reason people don't throng our churches to get some of God's forgiveness is that they are not sure we will give it to them straight. They have had enough experience with churches to be afraid that what we give them won't be genuine forgiveness, but something else in a forgiveness box. And I've had enough experience with churches to know that their fear is justified. There is no cheaper shot than offering somebody forgiveness and then reading him a list of conditions. Maybe God's forgiveness is sometimes misunderstood and misrepresented in the church, and maybe even in the Bible. Forgiveness is supposed to be a good news, but sometimes it's not. Sometimes it comes across as a threat

or a bribe or a suspended sentence. When a husband says to his wife or vice versa, okay, I'll forgive you this time, but one false move and I'm gonna nail you to the wall, somehow that doesn't come across as forgiveness. It's labeled forgiveness, it's in a forgiveness box, but it looks like a suspended sentence that can be revoked. The person is still guilty. He's still on trial. And it's very hard to live creatively and joyfully with an ax over your head, whether the ax is in the hand of a spouse or in the hand of God. Forgiveness that sounds like a threat is not very good news, but a lot of people think that's what the gospel is about. I mean, how can you possibly forgive a guilty person until he has suffered for his mistake? That goes against all of our instincts. And it's a good bet that God has the same instincts we have, right? It is good to forgive. It is right to forgive. It is divine to forgive, it's even fun to forgive after the guilty have suffered, after the debt is paid, after the worm has squirmed, then forgiving. If you go around forgiving people in the name of God before the penalties are paid, how are you going to keep up with the score? And what about points and batting averages and perfect attendance records? You've got to make the ledger balance, and that's in the Bible. Look again at that Old Testament story for this morning. David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord has put away your sin. You will not die, but because of your sin, the child that is born to you will die." Now, that's not completely satisfactory, but for a meticulous moral bookkeeper, it's neat enough. One sin committed, one baby dead, the ledger balances, case closed, forgiveness now in order. That's pretty vicious forgiveness, isn't it? But it does have the appeal of and justice with all accounts settled, all debts liquidated, all penalties paid. If that's what God's forgiveness as light, you can keep it. I don't want it, you don't want it, the world doesn't want it, nobody wants. Anybody who reaches age 21 and still thinks that God runs this world as a heavenly accountant with all good deeds and sins on one side of the ledger, perfectly balanced with rewards and penalties on the other side of the ledger, just hasn't been paying attention for 21 years. God is not that way. The world is not that way, life is not that way. There is no forgiveness in a system like that. Forgiveness does not exact revenge, it surrenders the desire for revenge. Forgiveness doesn't record debts, it cancels debts. Forgiveness doesn't audit accounts, it closes the book and throws it away. If you would know what God's forgiveness is like, I would send you not to that misguided commentator who helped put together the second book of Samuel, I would send you to the best source of God information I know. I would send you to Jesus of Nazareth. And I would point out to you his parting words to the sinful woman at that dinner party, "Your sins are forgiven, go in peace." Not go in dread, go in peace. Not go in fear, go in peace. Not even a, watch your step now lady. Not even a, remember you've already got two strikes against you. Just simply, your sins are forgiven, leave your kazoo here and go in peace. Friends, I don't know about you, but I'll take all of that I can get, I am forever in need of a closed ledger and a fresh start. That kind of forgiveness that sends me on my way in peace is good news to me. If we're looking to be coddled or explained or patronized or even excused, then God's forgiveness won't help much. But if we acknowledge that part of what's gumming up our lives is our own perverseness, and if we wish it to be otherwise and want a new beginning, then God's forgiveness is where we start. And don't be surprised if along the way, that symphony begins to sound more and more like our kind of music. Let us pray. Merciful God, for forgiving what we have been, for amending what we are, and for directing what we shall be, we give you thanks and praise through Jesus Christ, that masterful collector of old kazoos, amen. (hymn music)

- Accept this offering from your people oh God, and save us from making these gifts a substitute for the gift of ourselves. We offer them to you as outward tokens of our inward commitment to you and your work. We

pray in the spirit of Jesus, the Christ, amen. (hymn music) The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you this day and forever. Amen and amen. (hymn music)