
The Church is A Laboratory of Forgiveness

An article for the Cathedral Times, from the Very Rev. Sam Candler's sermon of 13 September 2020, titled "Forgiveness Is The Eraser!"

There are lots of names and images we use for the church. The church is a body, a congregation, a community – yes, all those things. But I have another favorite image for “Church.” The church is a “Laboratory.” The church is a laboratory for forgiveness.

The church is where we test, and experiment with, and practice forgiveness. Over time, it is the church where we learn how to forgive, and where we learn how to be forgiven. This is because there are so many mistakes in church, and so much imperfection, all in the same place where people generally want to do the right thing. And yet, we don't, over and over again, and all on top of each other.

Let me tell you a secret: Forgiveness is the way I determine how often someone goes to church. A lot of people claim that they are spiritual, or that they are Christian, or that they are members of a church. But I can never tell by what they say. I can tell people who go to church by how they are able to forgive and be forgiven. Yes, for me, the key evidence of whether someone goes to church, is whether they know how to forgive, whether they have learned forgiveness in the great laboratory of forgiveness, the church. Those who attend faithfully are comfortable with forgiveness.

Of course, forgiveness makes all of us uncomfortable; but it makes some people truly uncomfortable. There are people, I have heard, who claim that they have never had to ask for forgiveness, or never asked for forgiveness.

Yes, forgiveness is the best evidence that someone attends church, or is a Christian. If we do not understand forgiveness, we haven't really understood Christianity yet.

Well, in some weird sense, we have all been in various laboratories of forgiveness lately, wherever we are living. We have been on top of each other, living in petri dishes, and not really knowing what else is living here with us, at the same time. And dealing with those very real things: diseases and strengths, mistakes and solutions.

Oh, and if you live by yourself, you don't escape this laboratory! Your laboratory might be online, on one of the various social media platforms on the internet. You know what they are. And the old, offline, ways are still available for us to make careless comments.

Each of them is another opportunity for us to say something wrong, or unkind, or even sinful. In fact, some of the algorithms of those online platforms seem to be weighted toward the sensational and sensationalist, the divisive and antagonistic. It's how those platforms drive us to crave more.

It is hard for those social media platforms to deliver forgiveness. I suppose that they, too, can be laboratories, or tests, for how we want to live in this world. Do we want to live in impatience, and short outbursts of anger?

All forgiven people get tempted by these opportunities to lash out against someone else. That is exactly the tragedy of the gospel parable we heard from the Book of Matthew a few Sundays ago. The forgiven servant is grateful, but he immediately loses that gratitude by not being able to pass on the forgiveness, the release. He was released, but he cannot release another; instead, he attacks the other, and binds the other. He has not learned from church community, the laboratory of forgiveness.

.... The church is a grand laboratory for forgiveness. Where we learn forgiveness seven times seventy times. And, if we are paying attention, our families and households are the same spiritual laboratories, where we learn to forgive and where we learn how to be forgiven. Both sides of the forgiveness are critical: giving forgiveness and receiving forgiveness. Giving release, and receiving release.

To forgive means to release. It is truly one of the major principles of the Christian life. To release. For, when we release others, we suddenly feel ourselves released, too. When we let go of what we believe people owe us, then it is we who feel wonderfully free. The way God sets people free, is by using people to do it! God uses us to set his people free.

Once? Seven times? Seventy-seven times? Yes. Yes to all those numbers. And Yes to a lifetime of release. It is like washing our face, like saying "I love you." When those acts become practices and habits, they become part of who we are. And when forgiveness becomes part of who we are, we are close to the heart of God.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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