



**Orthodox Church of the
Entrance of the Theotokos
into the Temple**

**306 W. Main Street
Emmitsburg, MD 21727**

**The V. Rev. Elias Yelovich,
Rector**

<http://EntranceMission.org>

Forgiveness as Choice
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

About a month ago there was an article in the *New York Times* about forgiveness. It was an opinion piece, written by a Christian pastor of some denomination. It appeared in response to the news of the week, which had been filled with several reports of senseless gun violence in several of our nation's schools. The question the author explored was, "Why do these awful shootings take place? Why do some students go back into their schools and kill with weapons they have stolen from their parents or even purchased themselves?"

Of course, he observed rightly, the answer is multifarious. We live in a country possessed by the evil culture of guns, a culture that came about in order to allow the companies that manufacture the guns to continue to make huge profits. Those companies support the NRA, and the NRA and the gun manufacturers bribe our representatives and senators with money, money that is used to get them elected by lying to the people who will ultimately vote for them. All of this is no secret; it is the downside of our grotesquely wealthy democracy, where the love of money is indeed the root of all evil.

But this is only one of the problems. The bigger problem, this particular author suggested, was

that we have lost the will and therefore the capacity to forgive. We do not hold forgiveness before our children as one of the prime virtues to be developed and followed. Instead, our over emphasis on the freedom of the individual above all else has dulled our will to practice forgiveness. We teach our children to compete, to excel. If they cannot excel in academics, then it is sports. To be better than, to stand up for themselves. Just think, for example, of the kind of television programs that run on the major networks in prime time. So many of them present dramas about people seeking justice by means of revenge or punishment. How many shows are there, I wonder, on issues of criminal justice, where the resolution of all problems is revenge, violence, death, incarceration? Never, never, never, is the virtue of forgiveness held before us as something to be sought and practiced.

The lesson we head today from St. Mark recounts one of Jesus' first public miracles, the healing of a paralytic. This is a fascinating account, during which Jesus asks the cryptic but rhetorical question, "Which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven? Or, rise, take up your pallet and walk." We might think, well surely it is easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven!" But no, the clear sense of the rhetorical questions is that it is easier to say, "You are healed, cured!" Forgiveness is a divine virtue, difficult under the best of circumstances.

It needs to be observed that whatever the sins of this poor man were, they were real. He was forgiven by the Lord because he needed to be forgiven. St. Mark does not tell us what his sins were, but he makes it clear that his forgiveness was necessary. In fact, the sense of the entire account is that above all, forgiveness is necessary for all of us, and God offers it to us freely, knowing who we are, what we have become, what we have done and what we have left undone. All of us are in need of forgiveness, and God grants that forgiveness to us freely, no strings attached.

This brings me back to the opinion piece in the *New York Times*. The author there observed, and I think rightly, that so much of the violence perpetrated by students in our schools against other students, from bullying up to shootings, is the result of deep seated resentments that grow like cancer within the hearts of those who bully or kill because they have never learned about forgiveness: first, that God holds His forgiveness out to them, and second, that He calls them in return to forgive precisely those who hurt them.

To forgive, the writer observes, is not to overlook or to excuse. There is still the need to protect others from the sins of those who direct violence or corruption against others. But to forgive means that we see above all things that God has forgiven us, and that those who seek to harm us or do violence against us are themselves in need of precisely that one thing that they lack: the embrace of God's love.

Some of the greatest writers from the Orthodox tradition, the Desert Fathers, the Spiritual Fathers, even secular writers like Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, speak of such people who do violence against others as the "unfortunate ones." Unfortunate, because they are sick, because they are possessed and driven by sin, sin that leads them to do violence against others. Such people surround us in our daily lives, and we read about them or see them on the news each

and every day. When they focus their violence against us, we have only two choices. First, we can allow anger and resentment to drive us to seek revenge, leading us to the kind of bitterness and resentment that drives those who do violence against us in the first place. Or, we can forgive. We can see them as the “poor and unfortunate ones,” in need of our prayers. Yes, of course we must protect others from their violence, but we can and should forgive them the sins directed against us, because that is the only way we can and will be free from bitterness and resentment ourselves.

The opinion piece about forgiveness is a good summary of what each of us knows already. “Few, the author of the article says, “have the ability to honestly confront their own failings, flaws, self-centeredness — in short, their sin — unless they are assured that grace is ready to meet them.” As always, the author of the opinion piece observed, C.S. Lewis summarized it all so very well: *“To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.”*

Indeed, it is so: To be a Christian does in fact mean to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you! That’s what this Gospel lesson proclaims on this Second Sunday in Great Lent!

To Jesus Christ alone be all honor and glory forever! Amen.

Fr. Elias

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717-817-0084