**Forgiveness Sunday**

March 6, 2022

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We have now reached that point where Lent is at our doorstep. After the Liturgy this morning, we will have a small Maslenitsa, traditionally a Mardi-gras where it is a time for us to be jovial and the last time we consume dairy products until we break the fast at Pascha. Then we will return to the church and we will usher in Lent with Vespers of Forgiveness. As you know, the Orthodox Church doesn’t use ashes like the western churches to begin Lent. There is nothing wrong with ashes but for us Orthodox, it never developed as part of our tradition. Theologically, we would say that we don’t wear our faith, repentance and forgiveness on our person, rather all of our actions come from the heart. The tradition of wearing ashes comes from the Book of Jonah. When Jonah warned the Ninevites that God planned to destroy their city because of their corruption and depravity, the people covered themselves with sackcloth and ashes as a sign of their intention to turn from their evil ways (Jonah 3:6,10). Ashes are a plea to God for mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. If the wearing of the ashes is worn and not applied then what is the point of doing it. It reminds us of the boastful Pharisee in the temple. We are doing it for show and not for true repentance.

For us forgiveness and repentance are the ultimate goals during this time. For forty days we are expected to change our lives around. I remember when I was growing up Lent was about giving up something, usually ice cream or candy. We would make sure we didn’t eat meat on Friday, but that was it. It was about giving up something but it was not about bringing ourselves closer to God through prayer and doing good works for our fellow man. We didn’t go to church that much during Lent and often we didn’t even go on Easter. All I thought about during Lent was the Easter basket and chocolate bunnies we would get on Easter morning.

Somehow the understanding and the meaning of Lent has been lost and that the pagan forms of the holiday have replaced the original purpose. It’s much like Christmas with Santa Claus and gifts. What is so strikingly different from other religions like Judaism and Islam is that we have allowed our holidays to get lost in the shuffle of secular society, but Jews and Muslims have not let their holidays erode. When Yom Kippur comes, Jews will fast the whole day, and when Ramadan comes for the Muslim, they will fast from sunrise to sunset for a whole month. They have not let their holidays become a caricature of distortions like Santa Claus and the Easter bunny. Think about it, what does the Easter Bunny have to do with the Resurrection of Christ?

When we think about what scripture says about the Lenten season, we need to read Matthew 4 and the first Lent. This passage is when Christ went into the desert for 40 days. When Christ went into the desert he fasted during that period, so that he could prepare himself for the ministry of bringing the gospel to Jews and gentiles alike. Even though he was God, he assumed human form and he wanted to show us what we must do here on earth, of what will strengthen our frail minds and bodies. Whenever we undertake a major role within the church, it is expected that we will fast for a period of time, just like Christ did before he began his ministry. Some Orthodox traditions particularly in the Byzantine tradition apply this fasting rule for a man who is about to be ordained. He may enter a monastery for 40 days so that he is spiritually prepared to assume Holy Orders. Macedonians and Serbs will keep the fast strictly during the 40 days, no meat, fish, dairy, oil, wine, eating only a small meal of vegetables in the afternoon. Some even fast completely during Holy Week so that they can receive the Lord properly on Pascha.

Scripture tells us Christ ate nothing during that whole period of wandering. We are also told that he was tempted by the devil three times. If we have ever abstained from food for a long period of time, we lose resistance and we are likely to succumb to our bodily needs. Temptation becomes even more prevalent when we deprive ourselves in hopes of spiritual gain. This is when the devil is most active. One might wonder if Christ didn’t go to the desert and fast would the devil have tempted him?

During this coming Lent, we need to keep in mind that whenever we attempt to change our lives, the temptation will be there to revert back to our old ways, whether it is fasting, whether it is doing good works for someone, whether it is setting time for prayer. whatever we do to change our lives for the better the chances of temptation and to fail become even greater.

The gospel reading for today not only speaks of fasting but something more important for us to keep in mind during this Lent-- and that is forgiveness. This is the heart of true repentance—to forgive someone for whatever they have done especially those who have harmed us in a significant way.

At the end of Forgiveness Vespers, the tradition of the church is to bow down to each other and to ask forgiveness. Even though the other person may not have done anything directly to us, we are asking forgiveness for all their shortcomings they have done in this life. It is important for us do this with each other no matter how insignificant it may be, because we are in this all together, we are one body in Christ.

Most important for us during this Lent is that we work on forgiving grudges, whether it is one against us or one we have against another. In my capacity of being a priest, grudges are quite common and I have noticed that people are unaware when they hold grudges, yet they are apparent to another through their demeanor. People who hold grudges become so preoccupied with the incident that caused the grudge that the anger, bitterness, resentment and other negative feelings causes them to be blinded. When we ruminate on an issue, it is like a spiral going round and round with no exit in sight “Essentially, a grudge inhibits our ability to cope with or resolve our issue and keeps us stuck in the past—trapped in an unpleasant event or interaction that causes distress.”

Aside from it being a spiritual dead end, a “grudge doesn't solve the problem and [it] is highly unlikely to make someone feel any better. While it is certainly unhealthy to not feel or fully [process (and accept) our feelings](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-wrong-with-me-5094673), research shows that fixating on negative emotions rather than resolving them is also harmful—and can even make for an unpleasant demeanor and substantially erode our well-being.” “One 2017 study from the Annals of Behavioral Medicine was the first to associate greater forgiveness with less stress and ultimately better mental health.”

So how are we to handle our grudges? The whole approach is to recognize we carry a grudge – that is the start to correcting any behavior. Once we’ve recognized it, we should come to private confession. This kind of sin warrants a discussion with a spiritual father on how to handle the situation. Each situation is different and requires personal advice. We need to keep in mind that the outcome of dealing with a grudge will be a release from the ugly baggage of the past and that we will be restored to a better state of being with our Lord and fellow man, and only then will we be happy and at peace.

Remember grudges are serious sins. If we cannot forgive someone for what they have done, how can a priest forgive us when we go to Confession. Remember if we carry grudges to our grave and haven’t been dealt with in this life, we will certainly deal with them at the time of trial.