"Forgive and Remember!"

IT WAS May 13, 1981. St. Peter's Square at the Vatican was filled with 20,000 pilgrims and visitors from all over the world.

The golden rays of the late afternoon sun streamed over a vast multicolored quilt of the human race. There were black Africans in red and yellow dashikis, cyclists and their bikes from Northern Italy, and American parochial school children watched over by nuns in black-and-white habits.

The air was filled with keen expectation and a joy which was contagious. Looking like doves of peace, hundreds upon hundreds of light grey pigeons sat on fountains, window sills, and roof statues all around St. Peter’s Square.

Like a sweet fragrance their gentle cooing drifted through the air. Suddenly the crowd burst into cheers as Pope John Paul II was driven into sight. Cameras flashed as the smiling Pope stood in his open-air Popemobile. He waved blessings to the crowd and embraced little children lifted up to him.

AS THE Popemobile slowly made its way around the crowded square, a forest of eager hands reached out to the Pope. Tragically, one of those hands held a gun! Shots rang out! The gentle pigeons scattered in fright.

Severely wounded, the Pope fell backwards in intense pain. His white robes showed the spreading red stain of his own blood.

Time passed, weeks, then months. The Pope survived. The open-air Popemobile was replaced by a new vehicle which completely enclosed the Pope in thick sheets of bullet proof glass. This was a sad step to take. But it was taken because people did not forget. Rather, they remembered and learned from the assassination
attempt.

Time passed; in fact, a whole two-and-half years passed. It was now a chilly early morning on December 23, 1983. Dressed in his crisp white robes, the Pope sat in a bare, white-walled prison cell in Rome. Seated before him, knee-to-knee, was his would-be assassin.

Unshaven and clad in blue jeans, that man was now a prisoner, convicted with a life sentence.

The Pope looked into the eyes of this man who tried to kill him. Then, leaning forward, the Pope took the man's hands in his own and the Pope forgave him! In forgiving, the Pope let go of the burden of pain in his own heart. The Pope refused to chain his life to the terrible nightmare the gunman had created.

In forgiving, the Pope let the grace of our forgiving God shine through his life. In forgiving, the Pope opened up a door to personal reconciliation which the gunman could walk through, if he ever became truly repentant.

HOW DOES ONE KNOW when true forgiveness has taken place? More than just words, true forgiveness takes place in the heart. It begins on that day when we no longer carry ill will toward the person who hurt us.

And so it was with John Paul II. He emerged from that prison cell calling the prisoner his "brother."

That Pope forgave graciously, in a way that is a model for all Christians. But consider this, the Pope did not forgive and forget. Rather, what he did was forgive and remember.

For example, the Pope did not try to pretend the shooting didn't happen or that it didn't really hurt. It happened and it hurt him a great deal! The Pope did not suggest in any way that the shooting was not evil. In fact, it was terribly evil.

And most significant of all, the Pope did not try to get the
prisoner released from prison. Although forgiven by his victim, the man still bore responsibility for his evil act. There were consequences from his act which he still had to face.

JESUS TOLD a wonderful parable about forgiving: a parable about two brothers and their father. That parable was our scripture reading this morning. Let's imagine a portion of it.

The elder brother strides into the dooryard of the family brown stone farm house. The sweat pours down his tanned and muscled arms. Bits of chaff from the field still cling to his gray woolen tunic.

The day's work of wheat-cutting has ended. The sun is going down, but already a party is in full swing. The family home is filled with youthful guests, the lilting sound of pipes, and joyous laughter.

A servant tells the elder brother that this impromptu celebration is for his younger brother. Ragged, dirty, and aching with hunger, that younger brother finally stumbled back home after many months of wayward living in a far country.

The servant notes that the younger brother has been forgiven by his father. In fact, his father is now leading the celebration of the younger brother's homecoming.

HEARING THOSE THINGS, the elder brother begins to shake with rage. He throws his scythe down on the ground. It snaps in two. Through gritted teeth he mutters,

*How could there be such injustice? That boy squandered his inheritance! Now he returns home with nothing, and everyone, even our father, acts as though nothing happened!*

The elder brother stares at the rough callouses on his own work-hardened hands. A painful image from the past keeps flashing through his mind.
Months ago that younger brother made a terrible scene. Shouting and stamping his feet, the younger brother demanded his share of his father's estate. It was almost more than their aging father could bear, to have a child pick his bones before he was even dead. But eventually their father gave in.

Heavy-hearted, the father sold off a large chunk of the farm's acreage, just to satisfy his younger son. It was clear the younger son didn't give "two hoots" about the family farm.

Cash in hand, and hardly stopping to say "goodbye," that son just headed off toward the horizon one day.

THE ELDER BROTHER'S FACE is flushed with anger. But beneath his anger there is a fear, a fear that he will become a victim twice!

It was painful enough when his brother left. It ripped the family and the farm asunder. But now that his brother has returned home, the elder brother fears another injury.

He fears that their father will completely forget their past inheritance arrangement. He fears that in the name of forgiveness their father will be tempted to divide-up his estate, yet a second time (!) to make peace with his wayward son.

In fact, the younger brother already received his full inheritance months before. And he spent that inheritance, every last shekel of it, in the far country.

The elder brother grimaces. It hurts him to think his father might treat him so unfairly. After all, he's the son who has loyally stayed home and worked so hard to keep the family farm going.

JUST THEN, the silver-haired father steps from the house into the dooryard. He invites his elder son to join the celebration. But the elder brother refuses. Instead, the elder brother explodes in anger, saying:
Listen father, all these years I’ve worked like a slave for you, and you never once gave me and my friends a party! But, this son of yours comes home, after throwing your estate away in loose living, and you host a great celebration for him!

The father is stunned. Pausing a moment to study his elder son’s face, that father is wise enough to see the fear and the hurt which underlie this son’s anger.

With great tenderness the father places his hand on his elder son’s shoulder. Looking deeply into his son’s eyes, the father says,

Son, you are with me always, and all that is mine is yours.

IN FACT, this father has not forgotten! To be fair to his elder son, this father will not try to divide his estate again. The younger son spent his inheritance. In the days ahead, but not this day, the younger son will have to face the consequences of that reality.

Still embracing his elder son, the father tells him:

Now is the time for us to celebrate your brother’s return, for he was dead to us, but now he is alive! Now is the time for us to try to forgive your brother to let go of all ill will towards him. And because your brother is truly sorry, now is the time for us to welcome him back into the loving relationship of this family.

JESUS’ PARABLE stops at this point. Jesus never tells us what the elder brother did next. We wonder, did the elder brother remain in the dooryard still nursing his anger? Or, did he go into the house to try to forgive his younger brother?

We can hope that the elder brother tried to forgive. For if he did not, he would be excluding himself from the party!

If he didn’t try to forgive, the elder brother would be chaining himself to the nightmare of his younger brother’s past. He would be closing his own heart to the grace of our
forgiving God, that grace which seeks to shine through us all.

If he didn’t try to forgive, the elder brother would be shutting himself out of the loving relationship of his own family.

LIKE THE FATHER in this parable, our loving God invites us to forgive those who injure us. But going beyond that invitation, our forgiving God will even help us to forgive, once we decide we really want to forgive.

Over time, if we open our hearts to the possibility of forgiveness, God’s grace can help us experience that deep inner healing and sense of peace concerning our injuries which is true forgiveness.

God invites us all to forgive. But I suspect that all too often many of us are like the elder brother in this parable. Like the elder brother, we are out standing in the dooryard, unwilling to go into the party.

We're reluctant to forgive, because we fear that forgiving also requires forgetting. We're reluctant to forgive, because we fear that forgetful forgiving will open us or others up to being hurt again. We're reluctant to forgive because we fear that forgetful forgiving will totally ignore or undo the things which are fair and just.

But that’s not the case with Christian forgiveness. For we Christians can forgive and remember!

--We can forgive and remember, to learn from our injuries.
--We can forgive and remember, to protect ourselves and others from the repetition of those injuries.
--We can forgive and remember, so that fairness and justice are preserved.

GOD INVITES US all to join the party! The truth is, none of us has to remain standing outside in pain or fear or anger!

I ask you: Won’t you go in? Is there some person or persons in your life whom you really need to forgive? Forgiving others is important. It’s important, in part, because your own
well-being may depend upon it.

Now let us join together in the Lord’s Supper, the sacrament of God’s forgiveness offered to us. Let us now approach Christ’s table by singing together hymn number 311, “Let Us Break Bread Together.”