

A Homily for the People of St. Philip's on Forgiveness
October 31, 2010
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This is my first attempt at a homily. It is appropriate it is on Halloween. You can decide if it is a trick or treat!!

Thank you, Rob, for allowing me the opportunity to speak today. The reason I asked to speak is because I have had the privilege of being the Youth Director and Family Ministry Coordinator at St Philip's for over 6 years now. During that time I have attended many conferences and listened to the youth of our Diocese talk about their experiences, both good and bad. I would like to share some of the experiences I have had and what our youth are hearing at these events.

Several years ago, at one of our conferences, I listened as a youth, not from our parish, told their story of being a cutter. For those of you not familiar with this term, it is when a person cuts themselves. Not deep enough to claim their life, but deep enough to hurt themselves trying to cover the inner pain they are feeling. In this case the youth was crying out for help. The youth could not deal with the crisis in their family. A camp counselor saw the scars, talked to this person and found the counseling they needed. They were also able to look to God for help and the strength they needed to get through their crisis and get to a place of peace and acceptance. Now this youth shares their story to help others. As a result of this type of sharing, bonds and friendships come out of these weekends. Many of the youth are able to see they are not the only ones going through a crisis - something we can all learn from. I only wish you could see the power of God's love on these weekends. It always puts me on a mountaintop. To see a teenager open themselves and put their problems out in the open in order to help others is something to witness. I am always taken back by their stories. I am over 4 times the age of the youth but many times I hear of their experiences and I cannot even begin to imagine going through what they have at such a young age. But they find the strength, with God's help, to deal with these real issues.

The main story I want to share is one that is used on the Radix weekend at Kanuga. Radix is a weekend where the Baptismal Covenant is taken apart and studied. Some churches use this weekend for their confirmation class. I am hoping to get many of our youth that are to be confirmed to attend this year. The question in the Baptismal Covenant this story deals with is "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?"

This is a true story from South Africa. I think it speaks for itself, and as many times as I have heard it, it is still a moving story.

Imagine this scene from a recent courtroom trial in South Africa. A frail black woman stands slowly to her feet. She is something over 70 years of age. Facing her from across the room are several white security police officers, one of whom, Mr. van der Broek, has just been tried and found

implicated in the murders of both the woman's son and her husband some years before.

It was indeed Mr. van der Broek, it has now been established, who had come in the woman's home a number of years back, taken her son, shot him at point-blank range and then burned the young man's body on a fire while he and his officers partied nearby.

Several years later, van der Broek and his cohorts had returned to take away her husband as well. For many months she heard nothing of his whereabouts. Then, almost two years after her husband's disappearance, van der Broek came back to fetch the woman herself. How vividly she remembers that evening, going to a place beside a river where she was shown her husband, bound and beaten, but still strong in spirit, lying on a pile of wood. The last words she heard from his lips as the officers poured gasoline over his body and set him aflame were, "Father, forgive them."

And now the woman stands in the courtroom and listens to the confessions offered by Mr. van der Broek. A member of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission turns to her and asks, "So what do you want? How should justice be done to this man who has so brutally destroyed your family?"

"I want three things," begins the old woman calmly, but confidently. "I want first to be taken to the place where my husband's body was burned so that I can gather up the dust and give his remains a decent burial."

She pauses, then continues. "My husband and son were my only family. I want, secondly, therefore, for Mr. van der Broek to become my son. I would like for him to come twice a month to the ghetto and spend a day with me so that I can pour out on him whatever love I still have remaining within me.

"And, finally," she says, "I want a third thing. I would like Mr. van der Broek to know that I offer him my forgiveness because Jesus Christ died to forgive. This was also the wish of my husband. And so, I would kindly ask someone to come to my side and lead me across the courtroom so that I can take Mr. van der Broek in my arms, embrace him and let him know that he is truly forgiven."

As the court assistants come to lead the elderly woman across the room, Mr. van der Broek, overwhelmed by what he has just heard, faints. And as he does, those in the courtroom, friends, family, neighbors - all victims of oppression and injustice - begin to sing, softly, but assuredly, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." *

Think of the difference each of us could make if we had this level of faith or just a part of it.

The last thing I wanted to share with you, again, is the Prayers of the People being used in our services today. They are from the mission trip to Jamaica, that Christian Rudd and I went on a couple of years ago. I was taken by this church and the entire service. The first woman who welcomed us to the service came up to us as we walked into the yard. She was quick to let the other parishioners know she was the first one to greet us. I wonder how this would work at St. Philip's, to see the race of who could greet our visitors first and give an extended hand. Each part of the service was amazing. The Lord's Prayer was sung and kept building to a beautiful four-part harmony "For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory." During the Peace, every member of the church came by to welcome us, making sure we had a prayer book and a songbook. This prayer, I thought, went straight to the point and is expressed beautifully. Remembering this comes from a poor country yet the people did not reflect the poverty they lived in. God is referred to as a Holy Friend in these prayers, and for me it makes God more approachable and willing to listen to our concerns.

These stories are just a small part of what our youth are hearing and believing. As adults we need to show our youth this level of faith.

*From the June 1999 newsletter of the Mennonite Peace and Justice Committee (<http://MennoLink.org/peace/>) retold by James R Krabill, Mennonite Board of Missions, vice president for Mission Advocacy and Communication