Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, April 29, 2012 *Choral Evensong*
The Fourth Sunday of Easter *at 4pm*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Joel C. Daniels
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Sermon Series: "Lord, Teach Us to Pray"
SERMON 12: PENITENCE

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. *Amen*.

I'm trying not to take it personally that I've been assigned the Sunday when we talk about penitence. But I can't help but wonder: is it because I'm seen as especially familiar with repentance? Or more pointedly: that I should be especially familiar with repentance? Is this a hint, in other words? I'm not sure I want to know the answer to that question.

Our weeks talking about prayer have not been about prayer taken somewhat generically, but about Christian prayer specifically. It would seem, however, that we don't necessarily have to get into Christian specifics once we take up penitential prayer, though; an act of penitence directed toward a god or gods is something one sees throughout every religious tradition that I'm aware of, and it was certainly an everyday occurrence for all of the people around Jesus, Jew and Gentile alike. After all, our general action during a confession of sin isn't much different than what your run-of-the-mill worshipper of Zeus would have been doing: turning toward Zeus, apologizing for running afoul of what Zeus wanted, and hoping, and literally praying, that one has been penitent enough to win back Zeus' approval. In other words, the worshipper approaches Zeus because the god is being one way or doing one thing, and the worshipper hopes that, by being penitent, he can get Zeus to be another way or do another thing. This is Penitential Prayer 101, and it's far from new. We all want to get the gods on our side, and penitence is the way we do it.

But things have gone awry for the Christian when we think this way, as deeply-ingrained as such thinking may be. And perhaps we can get back on the right path by asking the question: who all benefits from penitential prayer? And I fear that too often the answer is that there are benefits all around: for us, certainly, as the penitent, but also benefits for God. God gets something (our penitential prayers), and we get something (being forgiven).

This idea that we can get something from God by giving something to God—if I do this, God will do that—isn't, however, a Christian notion. The expectation that we can set up a trade with God is to treat God as being like the kind of person that we are. Particularly, it assumes that God is in need of something: that God needs our supplication, or our love, or our penance, in order to act. The faith of

the Church, however, is that God doesn't need anything. There is nothing lacking in God that requires some kind of compensation to set it right, to meet that need. There are no needs, when it comes to God. I hope it doesn't hurt our feelings too much to realize that God doesn't even need us; not at all. (To delight in creation is not the same thing as to need creation.) The creation of the cosmos didn't add anything to God, didn't make up for something that was missing, didn't bring God to completion. Creation was done out of nothing but the overwhelming graciousness of God, the gratuitous, freely-given nature of God's love.

And this fact is the source of the critical distinction between Christian penitential prayer and others: we say that God is love. We don't say that God is a big powerful thing, like Zeus is, and that one of the things that our God does sometimes is love. When Christians speak of God, we make the truly astonishing claim that God is love itself. We claim that God's love is infinite, without lack, without reservation, without need of increase, and without possibility of decrease. God's love is what is most primitive about God: there's nothing behind it, nothing that's more foundational than it.

In contrast, we wouldn't say the same thing about Zeus. Zeus may be a lot of things, but we would never say that Zeus is love itself, nor would we ever say that Zeus lacks nothing. There's a pretty clear sequence of events with Zeus: Zeus is mad; you give Zeus something that he needs; then Zeus is not mad. This is called, to put it bluntly, idolatry, and the benefit of idols is that you can manipulate them; you can use Zeus or whoever instrumentally, to get what you want. Such is not the case with God: if God is without lack and without need, then God can't be used instrumentally.
But this raises a question: what makes us think that God doesn't work that way, the way all of the gods work? After all, everything we're familiar with says that penance is the necessary input, and that forgiveness—if it comes at all—is the output. Every bit of evidence in the world points to that dynamic. All evidence that is, except one bit: the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That changes everything, including what we mean by penitential prayer.

On Good Friday, the Son of God goes to his death as a result of human sin. The Word made flesh hung on the cross, having given himself up to powerlessness and vulnerability. The Messiah remained open for the world to do its worst to him, and the world did—we did.

Now, what happens next? What should happen next? What would Zeus do?

Insofar as we can say that God "responds" to Jesus' death, God responds by being who he is, which is love itself; nothing more, nothing less. The Spirit of God doesn't exact revenge, like Zeus would, but destroys death altogether, so that sin is not—and cannot be—the last word. And the resurrected Christ? What does he do? Appearing to his quaking disciples with the scars of his crucifixion still marked on his body, how does he respond? With forgiveness. "Peace be with you," he says. The usual dynamic is upset; the input and the output are reversed.

It seems to me that this is where Christian penitential prayer comes from: it's the result of being confronted not with a god's desire for vengeance, but by the gratuitous love of God—and that confrontation can be just as painful and chastening as any other. Penitence is the consequence of confronting without evasion the unmitigated, unqualified, and frankly incomprehensible love of God. It is the consequence of looking honestly at the life, the death, and the resurrection of the Christ, the giving of the only begotten Son, and realizing the horrifying contrast between God and us. One of the things penitential prayer does is attempt to do away with the self-deception that says that there is no contrast.

We might even say that our penitential prayer is actually a response to God's forgiveness, that the forgiveness precedes the confession. God forgiveness is there for us first, waiting for us, and the shock of God's forgiveness of the unforgivable, the shock of God's loving of the unlovable—this is what facilitates our repentance. When sinfulness confronts goodness (which is to say, comes face to face with love itself in the person of Jesus Christ) and doesn't look away, the only response is the anguished cry at the root of our penitential prayer, "Lord, have mercy! Christ have mercy!" Have mercy on us out of the depths of your divine goodness.

To return to our question, who benefits from penitential prayer? Not God. Only us. And benefit we certainly do. Not because we change God, but because through it God changes us, transforms us, molds our lives into the shape of Christ's life, that life of perfect obedience to the Father. We don't make God do something new when we pray for forgiveness. But, by praying in this way, we can—maybe for the first time—receive what God has been doing all along.

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.