One of my theories of life is that the ease of saying something is often inversely proportional to the difficulty of doing it – that is the easier it is to say the harder it is to do. I mean it is pretty easy to tell someone to perform a quadruple lutz, hold their breath for five minutes or enjoy the movie Titanic. However, it is very difficult to actually do these things. And I think such is the nature of what we see from St. Stephen today in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Here is a quick reminder of what happened. Before our passage this morning Stephen has been explaining the Gospel message to the high priests and it does not go so well. So today we are picking up the conclusion to this story when we read, “Then they dragged [Stephen] out of the city and began to stone him… While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he died.” Easy enough. Stephen is unjustly put to death but while he is being put to death he asks God to forgive those who are actively killing him. Now I know for me personally I am generally not all that ready to ask God to forgive a person who doddles a little too long in front of the cauliflowers in the produce section, let alone a person who is throwing rocks at my head. And I am guessing that this goes for many of you as well. So what is it that is in us that fights against forgiveness?

There is the traditional church answer of sin, which usually works pretty well and it does so in this case also. Sin can explain the problem in many ways, but I think at its core it is best fleshed out by going back to the original temptation put forth by the serpent. If you remember Eve initially objects to eating of the fruit because she says that she will die. The serpent responds saying, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” The argument that won Eve over was that through the fruit she could become like God. Now, of course, she and Adam did not become like God, but the sin was in the belief that they could and that they could perfectly judge good and evil. And that seems to lie at the heart of the problem of not being able to forgive. We like to judge good and evil subsequently believing that God does not quite know how to do it so he needs our help. Now this does not mean that everything we judge as being wrong is not actually wrong. The problem is when we take on the burden of being God. Where we assume omniscience and pronounce with absolute certainty the rightness or wrongness of every action. And when we act this way we have a sense that if we forgive we are allowing injustice to reign in the universe. But I think in many ways forgiveness is not actually about whether or not something is right and wrong it is rather about relieving us of the burden of pretending that we are God. It is about returning us to the state before Adam and Eve sinned.

We are not really equipped to be God. We are fallible and often let our emotion get in the way of our judgments. So when we forgive we are in many ways simply admitting that we are frail creatures who do not have the perfect knowledge required to judge the world. Again it sounds very easy to talk about, but is really hard to do, but it is something worth working towards because it relieves us of a job we are ill equipped to do, a job that will ultimately make us miserable so that we may be God’s own both now and forevermore.