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Matthew 18:21-35

UBUNTU

How seriously do you take the Lord's Prayer? We pray the Lord's Prayer every week in worship. It's prayed by millions of Christians around the globe. So, clearly the Lord's Prayer is pretty important prayer in the Christian faith. But do we mean what we say when we pray it? For example, do we really mean "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors?"

Forgiveness is a core component of the Christian faith and yet, it is quite possibly the most challenging aspect of our faith. The disciple Peter thought he was being extremely generous when he asked Jesus, "if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Seven times seems to me to be pretty generous. But Jesus offers a stunning comeback. Jesus answers, "Not seven times but seventy-seven times." Some versions of the Bible translate Jesus as stating, "seventy *times* seven." Whichever it is, Jesus is clearly using very large numbers to convey that forgiveness is limitless.

Let us be careful not to confuse what Jesus is saying about forgiveness with any notion of permissiveness toward wrong doing or injustice. Forgiveness does not imply acceptance of wrong behaviors. Forgiveness does not mean we should let abuse continue. Forgiveness is not the absence of standards of conduct or the absence of consequences or accountability. The Bible does talk about forgiveness but it also has a great deal to say about injustice and wrong behavior toward others. So when we talk about forgiveness being limitless, we are not implying that someone should keep taking abuse.

But while accountability is indeed important, so too, Jesus tells us is forgiveness. Jesus tells us here in this passage from Matthew that we are to forgive one another from our hearts.

From our hearts! If you have ever been wounded by someone, if you have ever had to try to forgive someone for a profound injury, you will know how hard it is to truly forgive someone from your heart.

But as terribly hard as forgiveness is, I think Jesus understood that forgiveness was not a burden but a gift. While it may be initially hard for us to perceive, Jesus teaches us about forgiveness because he understands forgiveness is a gift. Forgiveness frees us from carrying with us the burden of hatred and bitterness. It liberates our communities from cycles of violence. And forgiveness strengthens our relationships.

Ubuntu is a traditional African philosophy that is rooted in a belief of our interconnectedness. At the core of Ubuntu is the belief that my humanity is inextricably bound up in yours. Ubuntu understands that there exists a common bond between us all and that it is only through our interactions with others that we can ever really know ourselves or discover our humanity. The idea goes something like: “a person is a person through other persons.” Only through our interactions with others can we realize our humanity. Only through this interconnectedness can the human family thrive.

This interconnectedness is played out by how humans show generosity and helpfulness, by how they cooperate together, and share what they have, and show respect toward one another. But Ubuntu is also a factor in how humans deal with forgiveness. Within the Ubuntu philosophy is the idea that when we look at another person, even one who has wronged us, we see a brother or a sister, another human being, with whom we are connected.

Ubuntu was an underlying principle in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the aftermath of apartheid. In these sessions, perpetrators of acts of violence, torture, and great cruelty were given the opportunity to tell the truth about their crimes and to

seek forgiveness and clemency. Archbishop Desmond Tutu who led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was guided by his Christian faith and the philosophy of Ubuntu. The Commission took most seriously the evil of the crimes but also believed that the best way to achieve social harmony, best way for the community to thrive, was not an eye for an eye but restorative justice, a kind of forgiveness that included the telling of the truth and reparations.

Ubuntu offers us a fresh way to understand forgiveness. Forgiveness is part of our interconnectedness with others. Forgiveness is how you and I realize our humanity. Within Ubuntu lies the belief that human dignity is found not in our independence but rather through our interdependence. And mercy, the offering of forgiveness, is part of how we acknowledge our interdependence.

In the parable Jesus tells in our reading from Matthew, the main character in the story, the slave, does not recognize his interdependence with others. As we recall from the story, this slave owed his master a massive amount of money. Once again, Jesus uses exaggeration to drive home his point. The amount of money this slave owed his master was so enormous that he would never in his lifetime be able to pay it off. His master is about to throw him and his entire family into debtor's prison. But the slave begs the master to have patience with him. Out of pity, the master forgives this slave the entire debt. It is an astonishing act of generosity and mercy. But when this same slave then encounters one of his co-workers who owes him some money, he does not show any mercy toward his fellow slave but instead throws the fellow slave into prison.

The line in the Lord's Prayer seems especially appropriate for this parable: forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. There is in this prayer a realization of the interconnectedness between ourselves and others. Just as we fall short and need forgiveness, so too are we to extend

this same mercy toward others. In the parable, the first slave did not forgive despite having had great forgiveness extended to himself. He saw no connection between himself and others. The benefit he received from his master was his and his alone. He saw no connection between his benefit, his being forgiven, and his relationship with others.

Jesus calls us to forgive others from our heart. To ever be able to undertake such a hard task rests upon our understanding that we are not independent entities but interdependent. We are first dependent upon God who forgives us. Like the slave in the parable, the forgiveness we receive is undeserved and generous beyond comprehension. This gift of forgiveness strengthens our bonds with God and frees us to let go of the past and move into the future with hope. God forgives us! God allows newness and freshness to happen.

We are also dependent upon one another and connected to all members of the human family. The only way we can thrive is not an eye for an eye, or by holding grudges, or by separating ourselves from one another but recalling our interdependence and bringing mercy into our relationships. We are connected, we humans. Here we stand together on this planet, all of us flawed and imperfect, all of us in need of God's mercy. As hard as it is, I need to forgive you because sooner or later, I am going to need you to forgive me.