

And Forgive Us as We Forgive

Matthew 6:12, 14-15

John 20: 19-23

In the book of Acts Peter, who loved much because he was forgiven much, spoke of “the cleansing of the heart through faith.” Today’s part of the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” is about the cleansing of the heart. Daily so.

This petition of the prayer begins with the word “and”. As last week Carrilea led us with a fine sermon on “Give us this day our daily bread”, those words are now joined to the next with an “and”. This seems so right to me because every day we need bread and every day we need forgiveness. As the Kum Ba Ya version of the Lord’s Prayer we sang a few weeks ago goes:

Give us daily bread day by day,
and forgive our sins day by day,
as we too forgive day by day.

O Lord, hear our prayer.

A daily forgiveness and forgivingness. Both are vital for the cleansing of the heart. This prayer goes to the deepest parts of our heart and soul. Let’s explore.

I

We might begin with the three Greek words surrounding this petition. If you grew a Presbyterian you prayed, “Forgive us our debts.” Here we follow the Anglican tradition, “Forgive us our trespasses”. As the first translations of the Bible were

finished the Anglicans followed the “trespasses” version and the Reformed churches used the “debts” version. A third word was used in Luke: “Forgive us our sins”. They all point to the same condition of our lives. In the Revised English Version, a British translation, which we prayed today we said: “Forgive us the wrong we have done, as we have forgiven those who have wronged us.” Debt, trespasses, sins, wrongs. Do any strike your heart more deeply? Have you wronged another or been wronged? Has someone trespassed into your most sacred selfhood?

Or, how about these words from the Iona Community Worship Book:

Before God and the people of God

We confess to our brokenness,

To the ways we wound our lives

The lives of others

And the life of the world.

Those words strike deeply in me.

We are all part of the reality of sin, not just the sins we commit but also the power of sin itself to move in and take over. Forgiveness is the pardon that cleanses us and the power that sets us free.

Let’s look at the way Jesus forgave. It came in radical giftedness. It went out to everyone, even to his killers. It went to people the culture and religion of the time had placed beyond the reach of God’s mercy. With Jesus repentance and salvation had changed places! God’s mercy came first, not requiring repentance but bringing it in its healing wings. Do we get how shockingly revolutionary this is? It’s the shock of grace.

The reason Jesus' meals with tax collectors, prostitutes and those called "sinners" were scandalous because he didn't require a purity pledge before they ate. In his parable the father ran to welcome and embrace his wayward son before any speech of repentance. In Jesus God was flinging grace like a fool in love with the world.

II

What was the word Jesus used in the prayer? No doubt, the Aramaic word, *hoba*, for debt. Forgive us our debts. Debt in Jesus' time was a moral issue not just a financial issue. Accumulated debt over time divides the world into the rich and the poor. The Hebrew people tried to address the moral problem with what they called the Jubilee Year. Every 50 years the lands lay fallow, all debts were forgiven, all slaves and indentured servants were set free and all lands returned to their original owners. It's hard to even imagine.

When Jesus preached his first sermon in his home town he proclaimed that the Jubilee Year of the Lord was now here! We should not be surprised that he was carried out of the synagogue to be thrown off a cliff. Forgiveness of debts and return of property was not any more popular then than it would be today. It disrupted the accumulation and concentration of wealth among a few. He was anointed, Luke says, to bring good news to the poor—which did not go always over well with the rich.

At one point debtor's prisons were a moral evil in society. One could never get out to make enough money to pay the debt. To be born poor today in America can be a kind of debtor's prison. So we begin here: God's desire to create a world without the slavery and injustice of debt.

III

Now we turn to our sins which need forgiveness. When we sin against another we incur a debt, a debt that cannot be repaid only forgiven. When we sin against another person we at the same time sin against God. So we pray, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us.”

When we confess our sins, this act does not cause God to send forgiveness, it opens our hearts to receive God’s forgiveness. What about our unconfessed sins or the sins we cannot acknowledge? God is already on the way to forgive them too. It’s called grace.

What can wash away my sins?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

What can make me whole again?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

We may recoil from the blood imagery, or theologies associated with it, but the words are our human poetry pointing to the ineffable: *What we cannot do for ourselves God has done for us*. We cannot wash away our own sins, nor rid the world of its tired and terrible sin, but Christ is the lamb of God who carries away the sins of the world. Not just forgives, but carries them away.

What sins do you and I need forgiven today? It’s the tenderest of questions. Not the sins others think you need forgiven of [!], but the ones you know need forgiven. In one of Frederick Buechner’s novels, *The Final Beast*, the pastor lays his hands on a person needing forgiveness and prays this prayer of absolution: “Forgive you every face

you cannot look upon with joy.” The words have followed me ever since I read them. Might Jesus be praying those words for us today?

Paul writes that it is the kindness of our God that leads us to repentance. Why, how, else could we bring the most honest truth of ourselves before God? On his road to his adult conversion, C.S. Lewis, whose spiritual writings have helped millions through the years, tells of the role of the Spirit of God in helping him face his real self. He wrote:

For the first time I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose. And there what I found appalled me: a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds.” But what he experienced next was what he called, “ the Surprise of Grace”.

What about the sins of institutions and social groups? They aren’t likely to confess, but God’s forgiveness flows anyway. I’ve told you of a friend in one of my churches, an ex-Roman Catholic. He went on a Catholic retreat one weekend. As he talked with the priest about his spiritual struggles with the church, the priest said, “Maybe you need to forgive the church.” Can we do this? Can it free us to work in new ways in our “partnership in the gospel”, to use Paul’s words? (Philippians 1:5)

IV

Now we turn to the second phrase: “As we forgive those who have trespassed against us.” Now that’s hard isn’t it, which is why we need God’s help to do it. As I’ve said before, sometimes we pray, “Lord, help me forgive”, other times “Help me want to forgive.” And other times, “Help me WANT to want to forgive.” The two phrases of the

prayer are of one piece. They follow one another in healing necessity. A heart softened by forgiveness has new capacity to forgive.

Is there a conditionality about these phrases? That is, if we do not forgive another then God will not forgive us? Matthew's very next words, right after the Lord's Prayer seem to suggest so:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will forgive you; but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Heavenly Father forgive you.

If that is true we are all in a heap of trouble! Some passages in the Bible are more inspired — which means God- breathed— than others. It's hard to imagine Jesus saying that. I don't remember him saying anything like that elsewhere.

How are we to understand this added admonition? Let me begin here.

Throughout his gospel Matthew seems concerned about the unexpected prevalence of sin in the new church. If we are Jesus followers, why are still a bunch of sinners? So for example, in Jesus' parable of the Great Wedding Feast where the servants go out in the streets and invite everyone to come, he follows with the guy who showed up wearing the wrong kind of clothes, meaning his life was a moral mess. Or, the parable Jesus told in Matthew where the good wheat and the bad weeds are growing up together, and you can't pull up the weeds without pulling up the wheat along with it. What to do? Don't be hasty, Jesus says, to judge others and start a weed pulling expedition.

So when Matthew adds the words about God not forgiving us if we don't forgive others, he's dealing with the sin in the church. But guess what! He was more concerned with the lack of forgiveness in the church than about the presence of sin in the church!

What Jesus seems to say in his teachings is that for the cleansing of the heart, forgiveness needs to be flowing in and flowing out all the time. Grace that is kept and not shared is not grace. Another way to understand these words is to put them next to some words he said to Peter. One day Peter came to Jesus perplexed by the trouble he was having forgiving people. How many times do I have to forgive someone if they have sinned and kept on sinning? "Seven times?" Even that seemed a stretch to him. Jesus answered, "No seventy times seven." Now that can make us all scratch our heads. But I think what it means is to keep on trying to forgive until the grace of forgiveness happens. I've told you of the journal entry by C.S Lewis:

Last week while at prayer, I suddenly discovered—or felt as if I did—that I had really forgiven someone I have been trying to forgive for over thirty years.

So we keep on with the daily spiritual practice of receiving and giving forgiveness until something like grace happens.

I must add one precaution. It's about the potentially dangerous non- biblical phrase: "Forgive and forget." On one level it is right: we build resentment by dwelling on how others have hurt us. The word resentment literally means to feel over and over the hurt or pain someone has given you. So we ask God to help us let go of the hurts of the past. However, however, forgiving someone who has hurt you does not mean

setting yourself up to be victimized again. Don't forget! Use it to set safe boundaries. You can forgive from a safe distance.

V

The last section of the sermon is, “The Church as God’s Holy Apostolate of Forgiveness.” That’s a mouthful, but it’s what Jesus was up to on Easter Sunday Evening. There was no Baptist Sunday Evening Service, so he showed up where the disciples were huddled together in fear behind locked doors. If the authorities had killed Jesus, they might be next.

The risen Jesus suddenly appeared. He needed no door. “Peace be with you”, he said to them—which meant “all is forgiven”. They were also locked up in guilt, for as the gospels record, “they all forsook him and fled.” Then a second time he said, “Peace be with you.” They needed to hear it again to let it sink in.

Then he said, “As the Father has sent me, *apostled* me, so I send you, *apostle* you.” That’s what apostle means, “one who is sent.” Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit”, for what he sending them out to do was only possible with the Spirit’s help.

Then guess what was the first thing he sent out them to do? “Go, loose people from their sins.” That’s what the word forgiveness means: to be loosed. As we have been loosed from our sins, now we are sent to get out there and loose others from theirs!

Sometimes we need someone else, someone “with skin on”, as the child put it, to help God loose us, set us free from sin and it’s terrible residue of guilt, shame and remorse. And people need us in the same way.

So Jesus sends us forth today, a holy apostolate of forgiveness! We are ministers of reconciliation, agents of God’s New Creation

Now where do we start?