**June 17, 2018**

**Luke 11:2-4**

*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

We have a wonderful group of visitors today, probably representing a variety of religious traditions. Anytime you visit a church that isn’t your own, you are met with different customs. Some people kneel for confession, while others stand. Some people pray with their hands open in prayer, while others pray with their hands clasped together. Some people are submerged in baptisms (even infants are carried underwater in certain traditions!), while others only get a sprinkle. Regardless of our differences, it is moving to unify our hearts and voices as we can in prayer, song, and sacraments. The Lord’s Prayer specifically is a point of common ground for Christians. It is one of the few things that unite Christians in every tradition.

Sweet Hollow has been studying the Lord’s Prayer for several weeks. We have inched our way through the prayer, line by line, considered what we’re praying when we say these words, and how we can live into this prayer. We considered the parental and “hallowed” nature of God. We wondered if we are *honest* in seeking God’s will, and admitted our dependency upon God’s daily bread. So today, we land on the phrase, “forgive us…”

And I’m so glad to have a mixed group here for this discussion! For this phrase is the beginning of differences in translations in the Lord’s Prayer. Up to this point, everything is essentially the same. But once we begin the phrase, “forgive us,” we venture into an auditory jumble. Personally, I like hearing people pray with different words and languages. It illustrates how God speaks to different people in different ways, yet binds us together in the one body of Christ.

But even though **I** like hearing the differences in translation, not everyone feels the same. Some people want everyone to use the same words with the same cadence. So that we start at the same time and end at the same time, leaving no one hanging in the middle. Some people worry that the jumble becomes a competition – trying to have one version as the leader or dominant voice, which leaves other versions almost in the *wrong*, just trying to keep up. This mindset of course leads to anxiety and confusion, not knowing if someone should pause to wait for others, or race forward to catch up to the crowd, or speak louder to keep everyone on pace, or speak softer to not interrupt. This strange dance happens in every wedding and funeral and baptism.

To be clear, there is no wrong way to say the Lord’s Prayer. If you take nothing else away today, go with this: praying the Lord’s Prayer is the right thing to do, regardless of *how* you say it. Each person should say it in the way that best understand and can most earnestly *pray*. Don’t worry about how anyone else says it.

The differences in word choice happen because people have consulted different translations of the Bible. Presbyterians and theologically reformed Christians use the word “debtors” because it is most closely related to the Greek word in the Gospels. But there are plenty of people who say “trespasses” when reciting the Lord’s Prayer. That was the word printed in the first mass-produced English Bible[[1]](#footnote-1) (before the King James Version). “Trespasses” was an *incorrect* translation of the biblical Greek, but it came into common usage because it was printed and circulated earlier than other English translations. (William Tyndale, the author of this translation, was executed for this error 10 years after the publication.) Despite the historical controversy, in our contemporary era, we hear people pray with “debts” and “trespasses” and also “sins”, which is a more modern translation that gets to the heart of what the other two words intend.

For today’s purposes in thinking about this phrase, “forgive us… as we forgive others…,” I would actually like to use the word “trespass.” Ordinarily this is a word we see in BIG red letters on a sign at the edge of someone’s property. **NO TRESPASSING. KEEP OUT.** These signs are meant to keep people who don’t belong outside an area that is someone else’s. As you look at that sign, you are encroaching on someone else’s territory. These signs warn people that you may be going someplace you shouldn’t. These signs also warn people that while you may freely roam on this side of the sign, another authority will hold you accountable on the other side. Someone is watching.

In baptism, God marks us and claims us as God’s own children. In baptism, we are drawn into the body of Christ, called to be part of this great family that spans time and distance. Just as God makes promises in our baptism, so do we. We turn away from sin and evil. We move closer to God as we move under these waters. So in baptism, in a way, God draws a sacred line around us, connecting us to others, cleansing us, and protecting us. But we are human and prone to wander. We sin, and in doing so, we step outside our identity as children of God. We step outside that sacred circle drawn around us at the font. As we move away from God’s holiness and toward sin and evil, we trespass in a place that we should not be. We move into territory that is not ours, where another authority wants to hold us accountable. So God posts “No Trespassing” signs, warning us from going any farther away from God.

Sometimes “No Trespassing” signs mean “Danger.” Sometimes they just mean “Not For You!” When we trespass against God, we go into a place that God doesn’t want us to be. For whatever reason; it’s for our own good. The way into Trespass Land is fraught with difficulty. It leads to separation from our holy family, and danger to our physical, emotional, and spiritual selves. We see these warning signs, but we are human, and slow to learn. So we go ahead and trespass anyway. Every day. In every way. We trespass into idolatry when we think we don’t need God’s help, and can do it ourselves. We trespass into selfishness when we don’t take time to help neighbors or strangers. We trespass against the Sabbath when we keep ourselves busy all day, every day, running from one place to another. We trespass in so many ways. We can’t help ourselves. It’s part of our human experience.

Jesus knew this. He knew even the disciples would go and do things that God wouldn’t want. So when Jesus told the disciples to pray *this* way (with these words from the Lord’s Prayer), he included a petition for forgiveness: “Our Father, hallowed be your name. Forgive us our sins. Forgive us our debts. Forgive us our [trespasses].” Just as it is important for us to name God and claim God, it is important for us to name our indebtedness, to name our trespasses, and ask for God’s forgiveness. We ask forgiveness for encroaching on places that are meant to be out of bounds. And when we pray *in this way*, we do so knowing that God has already forgiven us. God forgave us before we asked, and before we ever did anything. God forgave us on the cross. God forgave us when Jesus was born in a stable. We were forgiven the moment God made creation. So when we pray “forgive us,” we do so with thanksgiving for what has already been done, and with humility for what we ourselves continue to do to need such a prayer.

Then we follow God’s model. As God forgives us for our many trespasses, we forgive others who do wrong against us. We forgive people before they ask. We forgive others before they actually do anything against us. We forgive them. Blanket statement. Esteemed theologian and seminary professor Shirley Guthrie wrote, “There is no such thing as reconciliation with God without reconciliation with our fellow human beings.” We forgive because, just like God, we yearn for wholeness within the body of Christ. We long to be restored to life within that sacred circle.

Because we are loved and claimed by God, we are also forgiven. Because we are forgiven, we are claimed in the Water and welcomed to the Table. Because we are loved and forgiven and claimed and welcomed, we should do the same to others. We love others because we were loved by God. We forgive others because we were forgiven by God. We welcome others because we were welcomed by God.

The practice of confession and forgiveness has long been associated with preparation to receive Communion. Those who are hungry for the eucharist are invited to seek forgiveness from God and one another for this great feast where all are welcomed, stranger and neighbor, friend and enemy, people from north and south and east and west. For how can we sit next together in God’s grace without sharing that grace with one another. It used to be common practice for church Elders to visit members during the week before worship, talk with them and confirm that people have confessed their sins and made appropriate preparations for Communion. Those who were deemed fit and worthy of coming to the Table were then given a token that they would present at worship. So as to keep trespassers away from the Table. Today, we do not give tokens. We do not ask anyone to pass a spiritual readiness test. Instead, we have come to believe that any trespassing we do, and any forgiveness God gives, is between each individual and God.

In these next quiet moments before we receive Communion, and as we prepare to make our final offerings to God, take these moments and earnestly pray, “Holy God, forgive us… as we forgive… Forgive me… as I forgive…” Pray with thanksgiving. Pray with humility. Pray with dependency. Pray with mercy...

1. William Tyndale [↑](#footnote-ref-1)