

Let Us Pray
A Lenten Series on *The Lord's Prayer*
by Rev. Susan Morrison

Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 18, 2007

And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" ²²Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. ²³"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

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Last week we considered the first of several petitions that we make to God when we pray The Lord's Prayer. "Give us this day our daily bread" we pray followed immediately by "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." As much as daily bread, we need daily forgiveness. Jesus followed the petition for daily bread with one for forgiveness. Just as we can die from lack of bread, so, too, can our souls and spirits die from a lack of forgiveness. Join me in singing the paraphrase of these two lines of The Lord's Prayer set to the African American folk tune *Kum Ba Ya* – lines that connect bread and forgiveness and the dailyness of our need for both.

Give us daily bread, day by day.
our sins, day by day.

Jesus in His Prayers, p.47.)

And forgive
As we too forgive day by day.
O Lord, hear our prayer. (Shoemaker, *Finding*

Bread and forgiveness. Bread gives us the sustenance to forgive and forgiveness is like bread to our body, mind and souls. There are several different words used in this particular line about forgiveness. In Luke, the line reads "Forgive us our sins as we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." In Matthew, the line reads "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." And we typically pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us" even though the word "trespasses" is not found in the New Testament. There are reasons for thinking that Matthew's "debts" is the closest to Jesus' Aramaic words. The first meaning of "debts" is the plain economic sense that someone owes someone else money or goods. In Jesus day, there was a long standing biblical tradition of forgiving everyone their debt every 50 years. It was known as the Jubilee Year. Jesus' contemporaries understood the meaning of forgiving debt.

Notice that the prayer assumes that we do have debts. Metaphorically, our books are in the red, as far as our

relationship to God is concerned. We have run up a debt with God so large that all we can do is ask for forgiveness. We can never hope to pay it back. Having acknowledged our utter dependence upon God for daily necessities like bread, now we acknowledge our utter dependence upon God to forgive us the debt we cannot repay. (Willimon and Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us*, p. 79.)

Notice that we seek God's forgiveness before presuming that we have what it takes to forgive others. If the line was reversed, and we conceived of ourselves first as forgivers, this would leave us in control. Out of a sense of righteousness, we could reach out in love to those who had injured or wronged us. But no, first the prayer asks us to ask to be forgiven. That takes us out of control. It means that we are suddenly at the mercy of someone else's account of our lives rather than our own.

That is why we offer a Prayer of Confession at the beginning of worship. Through this Prayer of Confession we name those ways that we have sinned, both personally and corporately. We admit that we have acted in ways that have separated us from God's intentions, God's hopes, God's expectations. Although words are almost always printed in the bulletin for us to pray, it is my hope that each of us will come to God with our own petitions, naming with honesty those things that we have done that have offended God.

Etched in my mind forever is a worship service of Confession and Forgiveness at Annual Conference a few years ago. The service recognized the horrific treatment of African Americans in the annals of Methodist history. Why for many years, people of color were not even counted as members in local churches on annual statistical reports. That African Americans remain Christian at all is a miracle since they were told by their slave owners that Christianity justified slavery. And so, in this worship service, we, as an Annual Conference, confessed our sins and complicity in racism, asked for forgiveness for the sins of our past and prayed that whites and blacks can be transformed into a common story of being Christian. Forgive us our sins, we prayed.

The good news is that God is eager to forgive, to offer new beginnings. Jesus, the one who was God Incarnate, showed us the generosity of God's forgiveness. Throughout the gospels Jesus forgives again and again. People ask to be healed. Jesus forgives them. They ask for an explanation of his teaching. Jesus forgives them. "Who is this who forgives sins?" his critics ask. In forgiving, Jesus not only demonstrates his divinity, but also forces us to acknowledge our dependency on God. It is in the very nature of our God to forgive. (Willimon and Hauerwas, p. 81)

It is only after we have asked and received God's forgiveness that we can then ask God to help us in forgiving those who have offended us. Stephen Shoemaker points out that there is a spiritual circle of conditionality to forgiveness. God's forgiveness loosens our hearts to forgive others; but if we refuse to forgive others, we stop the flow of god's forgiveness to us. Picture the heart with a double-hinged door that swings in and swings out. As the door swings in, God's forgiveness flows in. but if we shut the door so that forgiveness does not flow back out to others, the door is frozen not only to the forgiveness we might give but also to the flow of God's forgiveness to us.

Forgiveness does not come naturally or easily. Human beings tend to prefer retaliation to reconciliation. Even the bible suggests "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." You hurt me. I'll hurt you. You strike me. I'll strike you. You kill my people. I'll kill your people. We live in a world that is in a constant state of violence and strife.

Jesus offers us a different way. "Turn the other cheek" he commands. "Love your enemy. Do good to those who hate you. Forgive. Not 7 times 7 but 77 times!" In our gospel reading Peter's proposal to forgive seven times sounds extravagantly generous. It reverses the seven fold pronouncement of vengeance in Gen. 4:14. But Jesus' response is far beyond Peter's proposal. His response of forgiving 77 times is not a matter of math, but of the nature of forgiveness. Whoever counts has not forgiven at all. True forgiveness is beyond any calculation (*New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. 8, p. 380).

Forgiveness does not mean that we cease to hurt. Some wounds that we suffer are deep and hurt for a lifetime. Forgiveness also doesn't mean that we necessarily forget. Emotional pain can linger long after we have had the courage to forgive. Forgiveness grants us freedom. By forgiving, we no longer allow the offense to control and

dominate our behavior.

So when we do not forgive as we have been forgiven, God's own forgiveness is invalidated. That was the point of this morning's parable. At the conclusion of the parable, the unthinkable happens. The gracious king takes back his forgiveness. His anger underscores the awfulness of the servant's failure to forgive as God forgives.

There are many amazing stories of forgiveness but there is one that I actually experienced that suggests the true essence of forgiveness. I shared this story with you in one of my first sermons upon my return to Holy Trinity, but it is a story that can be heard again and again and again until each one of us can practice forgiveness like Edna and Arthur Hart.

It was in 1999 that Jay and I spent three months in South Africa. I was on a pulpit exchange with a pastor from Cape Town. There we heard amazing stories about forgiveness in post apartheid South Africa as Bishop Tutu's *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* did its work.

But the memorable event that I want to recount to you this morning happened on the day after Christmas. I had a call from Edna and Arthur Hart. They had just received word that their daughter, Noreen, had been killed by two black teenagers. Their 10 year old grandson had witnessed the murder. Noreen had refused to let the hijackers take either her purse or her car and they had smashed the window of the drivers side and shot her in cold blood. Her son climbed out the passenger side and took refuge under the car. What a horrific deed! Such a senseless loss of life.

But each time I visited Edna and Arthur, they wanted to pray for those two black teens. First they wanted them apprehended and justly punished. But then they wanted to find a way to forgive them for their sin. They realized that for many years, as white South Africans, they had contributed to the atrocity of apartheid and their loving God had forgiven them for their sin. Now the tables were turned and they were on the receiving end of violence and death. But because they had been forgiven, they believed that they, too, needed to forgive. They did not want to anger their God who had so graciously forgiven them by not forgiving another sinner. Can you imagine? Wanting to forgive the ones who murdered your daughter?

This story may be incredible and unbelievable, but it is about the power of Christ and forgiveness. That is what it means to pray "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." So be it. Alleluia. Amen.

Will you pray with me?

Have mercy on us, O God. According to your steadfast love and your abundant mercy, blot out our transgressions. For we know our transgressions, and our sin is ever before us. Create in us clean hearts, O God, and cleanse us from our sins. Take us by the hand and show us the way forward. Though the path be hard, do not let us stumble. For how can anyone lose the way when you, our God, guide us? Amen and Amen.