

THE LORD'S PRAYER: A PATTERN FOR LIFE

IV. "TO FORGIVE AND BE FORGIVEN"

MARCH 29, 2020

This sermon would have been preached on March 29, 2020

The Sermon:

John Killinger tells a powerful story of forgiveness.

It began as an ordinary church service, and it went along pretty much as usual until – perhaps during the concerns time – one of the members stood to speak,

"The Lord has been laying something on my heart," he said. "There is a lot of unresolved conflict in this congregation, a lot of hurt and resentment. It has been lying around for such a long time that we've forgotten how it began.

"But it is getting in God's way. We are limiting God by our lack of love and forgiveness in this church."

Strong stuff, as you might imagine. It brought things to a dead silence.

The minister looked at his sermon. Somehow it didn't quite fit. So he folded it and tucked it into his Bible. When the man sat down, the minister turned to the Sermon on the Mount and read these words from Jesus:

"If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23-24)

The pastor continued, "Bill's words strike a chord. Maybe we do limit God by our lack of forgiveness and love. If we do, it is time to remove that limitation.

"Today I've put away my sermon. Instead we're going to have some free time to think about life and to pray and to go to anyone in this Sanctuary and ask that person's forgiveness for anything standing between you. Then we'll have Communion."

At first it was very quiet. No one made a move.

After what seemed an eternity, a woman got up from her pew and walked to the other side of the church and sat down by a woman. A few, then a dozen, two dozen people, began moving around. Soon there was a buzz of conversation in the sanctuary.

It went on for thirty minutes. Finally, in a new atmosphere they heard the Words of Invitation, celebrated the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and held hands as they sang "They'll Know We are Christians By Our Love."

Now, Killinger asks this question:

"Do you suppose this is what Jesus had in mind when he told the disciples to pray, 'forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors?'"

It's Killinger's story, of course, but I have actually seen something like that happen within worship in a church I served, not as a whole congregation, but between two women who I knew were in the midst of a knock-down-drag-out.

I can tell you, it was pretty amazing.

II.

This morning we come to a deeply personal portion of the Lord's Prayer.

How did we get to where we are today?

The prayer begins not with us and our needs, but with God. It begins with who and how God should be regarded, and where we should be looking for God's rule.

Only after that does the prayer turn to our needs.

In what order do they come?

We learn what Jesus sees to be our deepest needs and the answer is surprising.

As David H. C. Read says:

"The first request shocks us with blunt materialism, and the second by its emphasis on something we would rather forget.

"The first, to put it another way, disturbs the devout church attender who finds it most 'unspiritual' to pray for daily bread; and the second request disturbs the average person on the street who doesn't think forgiveness is all that necessary."

I once saved a story from Reader's Digest.

Supervising summer maneuvers, a general noticed a Jeep coming from of a nearby village. Since there was tight control on vehicle usage, the Jeep was flagged down, and the general approached the driver, now standing bug-eyed at attention.

Noting that the back of the Jeep held the soldier's supply run of beer and soft-drinks for his buddies, the general barked, "Soldier, don't you know you're not suppose to be using this vehicle for this purpose?"

Taking a nervous gulp, the GI replied, "Yes! Sir! (and you have heard this before) but sometimes forgiveness is easier to obtain than permission."

III.

Let me ask: Can we honestly put this issue of forgiveness on the same level as a prayer for bread?

When we desperately need food to keep alive, would we have anything like the same intense, consuming desire to be assured of God's forgiveness?

It's hard to think of forgiveness as being that important, that immediate, that necessary, for maintaining life.

Yet, as we see, in the mind of Christ, forgiveness - both divine and human - is like our daily bread, it is a matter of life and death. Jesus Christ says, "Pray like this: forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

IV.

Let's pause to straighten out this "debts" and "trespasses" business. While a bunch of Presbyterians acknowledge their debts, down the street, our Methodist and Episcopal friends confess their trespasses.

Of course we mean the same thing. At least I'm not prepared to admit that, while our Episcopalian ancestors knew all about trespassing, our Scot Presbyterian ancestors found a financial image of debts and debtors more appealing!

Since neither expression has a contemporary version for our modern ears, the translators of Today's English Version have boldly given us this reading:

"Forgive us the wrongs we have done,
As we forgive the wrongs that others have done us."

V.

"Forgive us the wrongs we have done..."

Just as natural life depends on daily bread, so our spiritual life and health depends on giving and receiving forgiveness.

In this portion of the prayer, we are asking two things:

- that God keep us alive
- and that God pardon our sins.

For Jesus, our health, yours and mine, consists in nourishment for the body and release from guilt that boxes in our spirits and sucks away new life; the life that Jesus brings.

So Jesus says: "Great God, who is the Parent of us all, forgive us our sins."

Here new light begins to break through.

We discover here something about the essence of Christian Faith. Our faith is not a grim recognition of our guilt, not a juicy catalogue of our sins, but words of the reality and certainty of our pardon. We proclaim that every Sunday right after the Prayer of Confession. We don't need to spend any time drawing a full picture of our wrongs; most of us have a pretty good idea where we fall short!

Jesus was an utter realist about these things; he wasn't a sentimentalist who believed that spreading around a little more goodwill would settle all the troubles afflicting the human race.

Jesus knew that we are out of relation with other people, with ourselves, and with God; and Jesus knew all of us stand in need of that forgiveness which again brings us into right relationships with God, with others and within ourselves.

VI.

Perhaps the most significant thing we should notice is the striking reference to human activity in the second half of this verse.

"Forgive us the wrongs we have done,
as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us."

The great Christian writer George Herbert said, "He that cannot forgive others, breaks the bridge over which he must pass if he would ever reach heaven; for everyone has a need to be forgiven."

Forgiveness begins as a response to our being forgiven.

In some ways, this is the most unexpected part of the whole Lord's Prayer.

I believe Jesus is saying that the forgiveness of others is the condition of our own forgiveness. Our relationship with God is conditioned by our relationships to other persons.

This is amazing!

What we might expect is something like this: "Forgive us our sins, because we are very sorry for them; or because we are truly repentant; or because we promise to do better next time." Or the most recent way of apologizing that is in the news today: "I admit that mistakes were made."

Not one of these is suggested. The words are quite explicit: "as we forgive those who have wronged us."

Notice, it's not because we forgive those who wrong us; we are not claiming forgiveness because of what we have done about forgiving others. The word is "as."

It is a causal, mutual, connecting relationship. I take it to mean that if others have not experienced the forgiveness which only I can bring to them, then I cannot reasonably expect to experience the forgiveness which only God brings to me.

We are forgiven, as we are in the act of forgiving others.

VII.

What happens in this "miracle" of forgiveness? The German pastor, Helmut Thelicke, has suggested:

"It is exactly what happens when a mother forgives her child, or a wife forgives her husband. When a child lies or a husband deceives his wife, something between them is broken. We say, quite correctly: 'There is something between them.'

"When the person forgives, this does not necessarily mean I 'forget' it. Forgiveness means "'This shall not separate us. The bond of love is stronger than the separating power that would come between us.'"

In many ways, we are all alike: a good grudge is difficult to give up. But Jesus is saying to us that the reality of God's forgiveness in our own lives has everything to do with the way in which we act and operate with our forgiveness of others; there is a connected mutuality to it.

We forgive so those separating things from our neighbors will not, shall not, separate us anymore.

And this helps us to understand the fellowship of the Church in a new way.

The Church becomes this community which survives and thrives – not as the gathering of the self-righteous people who always know they are right; that is not the real Church.

I do believe the Church is at its very best when it is the fellowship - when we are the community - of those most ready to forgive because we are the mutually forgiven.

Jesus gives this model: as the Church ...

“Be the fellowship of the forgiven
who are in the process of forgiving.”

This kind of forgiveness becomes a way of life.

