

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, associate minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 4, April 3, 2011, dedicated to all who struggle to forgive.*

# **“And Forgive Us Our Debts, as We Also Have Forgiven Our Debtors”**

***Matthew 6:12  
(Part V in the sermon series  
“The Lord’s Prayer”)***

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

+++++

It seems to me we have a couple of pesky things to get off our table before we can comfortably prop up our elbows and discuss this impossible possibility called forgiveness.

Let’s start with the lightest and probably the most commonly asked question – which is correct – forgive us our debts, our trespasses or our sin? Are you one who wonders about the difference? Here’s a very brief explanation. Long ago and far away, which word was prayed depended on where someone lived and under whose rule they lived. Nowadays it usually depends on what church we were attending when we learned the prayer. The liturgy of the Anglicans, United Methodist and Episcopalians a some who based their early prayer on the Common Book of Prayer and/or the

16<sup>th</sup> century Tyndale Bible. Tyndale used both the Greek and Hebrew texts. Then, in 1611 some 64 or so scholars created the King James Bible, using about 3/4<sup>th</sup> of the Tyndale Bible. The word we say differently in our prayer is one of the words that drew from different, but related words, when they were translated. And as a result we now have both trespasses and debts. In addition, one newer translation reunites them as “sin.”

If you enjoy history it's also easy to get swept away on underlying images of debts, trespasses and sins. The studies will carry you to the far reaches of early culture, scripture and the relationship of interest, pledges, debt and slavery that go back to Egyptian taskmasters, Cyrus the Great, Jeremiah, Nehemiah, Matthew Mark and Luke as starters. We could spend a month of Sundays on it, but in truth it would only be a distraction from the real point – which is forgiveness. Call the problem by whatever name you prefer, the struggle is forgiveness.

Matthew sets it down in front of us like bread on the table.

“Lord if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”  
 Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but I tell you seventy times seven times.’ (Mt 18:21-27)

So with a show of hands then, how many of us are in favor of forgiveness? It's amazing how much we agree with it in theory and how challenging it can be to let it work in us and through us. If you and I are at odds with each other, which of us will go first in forgiving the other? Who will flinch first? Sometimes we sound like Mikey's big brother at the breakfast table – trying to get little Mikey to taste Life Cereal – taunting him to go first – ‘Try it Mikey – you'll like it!’

Other times time we step into the shoes of the older bother who watches his sibling coming up the garden path, seeming to think – “something wicked this way comes.” (Ray Bradbury) We see him rehearsing the speech we know he's going to drop on Dad

running toward him. We just *know* he is going to be forgiven....yep, there it is – the arms wide, the embrace strong, the tears flowing; son and father unite. Forgiveness can be sweet, but it can also have a harsh sting! We are all in favor of forgiveness, but we do not always want to see everyone forgiven.

It is hard to grasp that it is God's joy to set us free and forgiveness sets us free. It is God's desire to give us life abundant. We know God can forgive because God is God, but this human forgiveness is another thing! In the blink of an eye forgiveness gets tangled up like spaghetti with issues of power, rage, righteousness, justice – usually our version of justice, not the God-kind.

Not only that, it doesn't take long to learn that when we withhold forgiveness it can seem that we are keeping our self safe. It is not hard to convince ourselves that withholding forgiveness prevents someone else from hurting us again; and as an added bonus, it seems like it can keep us from having to deal a second or third or fourth time, with shame. And, few are disappointed when they realize that not offering forgiveness just might make the other person squirm a little longer. Forgiveness is tricky business. We are all in favor of forgiveness, but we do not always want to go first; sometimes we don't want to go at all.

The truth is, even if we finally get the words out and say, "I forgive you" or "God, please forgive me", things don't magically get better. We humans are not nearly as forgiving as our dogs and cats. We cling to our wounds. Sometimes we like it that way.

How many have heard or said, "I can forgive you, but I will never forget?" It almost always leads us to troubled water. Especially if we say it laced with anger. Now let me be clear, when it comes to genuine forgiveness, there rests within it a healthy reminder of our past and a future hope of reconciliation. Forgetting does not mean jumping back into danger. Healing and changes usually take some time, but we need not let that stop us. We do not need to be alone in the process. God, counselors, pastors and friends can help us on the journey of learning new healthy ways to

relate to each other. At the same time, if we do not let go and forgive wholeheartedly we punish our own self. Lingering bitterness and hatred wreaks havoc on our health. The cycle is not pretty.

Unhealthy stress diverts the flow of essential minerals and vitamins headed to our immune system. Will Carl, president of Pittsburg Seminary gives us perspective when he asks, "Wouldn't it be nice if anger and resentment and the inability to forgive would consume fat cells instead of vitamins and minerals? If that were the way things worked, we would all be trim and fit."<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately it doesn't work that way. Withholding forgiveness blocks healthy relationships; interferes with healthy bodies and interferes with healthy minds. It impedes God's gift of life abundant. It arm wrestles with our salvation – our peace, wholeness, health and shalom. God tells us to forgive so we may know salvation now and coming.

Imagine how steamed Moses must have been – he worked day and night leading his rag-tag group across the wilderness. He listened to them cheer when they were saved. He listened to them complain about a boring diet. He led the grumblers over one sand dune and up the next. Then one day, he left his brother Aaron in charge and went up the mount to listen to God. God gave him a heads up that there was mischief below, so Moses headed back to the people. Did he see them praising God for keeping them safe and fed as he descended? No, he saw they melted down the family heirlooms and created a new idol to replace God! A revolt against God took place where thanks were due. Moses must have been seething...and yet, he turned to God in prayer seeking forgiveness for everyone. How could he?

Do you also remember the gunman one who killed the innocent children in the Amish school a few years ago? It must have really frustrated some of the reporters that day. They did their best to get someone to condemn the gunman. Instead, the parents and the community simply said, "We forgive him." I don't know how many of us could do that, but I know their story, their witness

as forgiving hearts, continue to teach us about God's promise and God's hope.

God tells us to forgive so you and I may receive the peace of God which surpasses all understanding - the salvation of the world - the gift of God's own beloved. The one who tells us, "And lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." (Mt 28:20)

I've asked Mark and some helpers to lead us again this morning. Have you signed this part of the prayer yet with an interpreter? While they are coming forward, I'll get you started with the way I was taught. Open both hands palm up. Now raise your middle finger on one hand and touch it to the center of the other open palm; then brush all your fingers across the palm toward you a couple times and then away in the same manner; as if you were gently strumming a guitar . . . "Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us" just like Jesus did for us when the nails pierced his hands or wrists . . . for you, for me, for all of us.

No wonder we are reticent to extend forgiveness. It can be risky business, especially as we pray, "Forgive me God, the way I am forgiving others." May all our prayers and our lives, affirm and celebrate the unlimited, unmerited, amazing grace of God, amen.

<sup>i</sup> William J. Carl III, *The Lord's Prayer for Today* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2006), 65.