

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 28, 2013, the 10th Sunday after Pentecost.

“Simple Honest Trust”

Luke 11:1-13

We say this prayer almost every week – many of you pray it at home, in the car, in the grocery store, when you turn of the morning, afternoon or evening news broadcast. Sometimes we pray it when the pain is bigger than life – when wars break out, when storms of weather and storms of life turn everything upside down.

For those of us raised in the church, we turn wonderfully, reflexively, caringly to the Lord’s Prayer. Many of you were taught to pray it in Sunday school class. The prayer teaches us that *our* prayers can be simple, honest, focused on our day-to-day. The prayer teaches us also to be determined and persistent. In fact, the word we often translate as “persistent” also means “shameless.”ⁱ It seems we need not worry ourselves too much about whether or not something is worth “bothering” God about . . . our prayers are to be simple, honest, concerned with even the day-to-day, to the point of being shameless in our persistence. We catch on to the theme quickly – and a few pages later in our Bibles we can almost hear the Apostle Paul chiming in, telling us to “pray without ceasing.” As your pastor, I give you all high marks! You are on the right track.

Now, I will up the *Jeopardy* question level. Which version of the prayer do you pray most often? The one from the gospel of Matthew, or Luke, or the one you know from the church you attend, but you're not sure where it's at in the Bible? I know you are usually shy in church, so I'll offer the answer. Today's prayer is located in the Gospel of Luke – the eleventh chapter, verses 1 through 13. (I want to make sure everyone becomes an insider today!)

And, lastly – who taught you this prayer? I'll let this thought rest for now.

The first part of the prayer is all about God – “*hallowed by Thy name; Thy kingdom come.*” It’s humbling if we are paying attention, to know that God is God and we are way down the chain of command with the ants and grasshoppers. Then, just when we are thinking we can get off scot-free, we lead each other into the petition for forgiveness. Now we are in trouble!

Suddenly we hear the person next to us saying we are all responsible to forgive each other! It’s so much easier to assume this is all about God forgiving us . . . but the words are clear – *forgive us our debts – as we forgive our debtors!* This phrase strikes us like driving in one of those raging-river downpours we had last week – there’s no safe way to hit the brakes without an unpredictable skid across the road!

Frankly, I want God to be in charge of forgiving – not you and definitely not me! There is always a huge possibility you will not forgive me or that I will not be in the mood, or be able to forgive you! I remember when I was learning about the Lord’s Prayer in seminary. I dug deep into the text and language. I was hoping this part was somehow mistranslated, but it was not. Forgive us our debts, our trespasses, our sin - as we forgive our debtors, trespasses and fellow sinners. There is one translation that stretches it out just a little – “Forgive us *as* we also have been forgiven,” which, in the end, still tells us that we have been forgiven by God and others so now it is our turn to forgive in like manner. We need help.

Part of the blessing our ancestors in faith held in their pockets was the knowledge of the year of Jubilee – that seventh year when all debt is to be forgiven. It is the time of release financially, physically and emotionally. Isaiah brings this sense of freedom into the light. It’s a time when good news for the poor includes enough food, release of captives and forgiveness in all kinds of ways - including financial debt and all other forms of enslaving each other – food, relationship and kindness. Within this section of the gospel

of Matthew we are engaged in teaching stories and mores for society, reminders we bound to God and one another by hospitality.

A couple of weeks ago in Oklahoma, we were face to face in a culture of hospitality. When it is time to run for cover, there is no time to make sure you have your wallet, or purse, or a loaf of bread. When you have to suddenly respond to the siren and dive into an overly large tin can looking underground shelter to be safe, you understand at a gut level that when you come back out a few minutes later, your life may be dependent on the kindness of strangers. When you come out of the ground, your neighbor is your very best friend – the trials and bread of life connect you. They connect all of us. Hospitality to the stranger is alive and well.

This week we see the same efforts of biblical hospitality as it arises in the aftermath of the horrible train wreck; and in those who comfort the families of the children in the school in India who died after consuming poison at lunch. We are also reminded this morning of hospitality with Back Bay Mission and the Gladden Community House. I could go on and on – you wear the robe of hospitality well. God created humankind with a heart of generosity. In times of crisis and need it seems to overflow from everyone. And yet on the average day . . . we forget.

The poor of body, mind and spirit are within us and around us all the time, but somehow we become tone deaf. We hear someone persistently, shamelessly, knocking on the door in the night, there is a hint of kindness, but it takes a while to arrive. Sometimes it takes a while, even when we persistently pray that which Jesus taught us.

In her book *God's Welcome, Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World* ii, Amy Oden, professor of Early Church History and Spirituality at Saint Paul School of Theology at Oklahoma City University, tells the story of Bud Welch, whose daughter Julie was killed in the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on 1995. She was his joy; her life ended at the age of 23. Understandably, he wanted Timothy McVeigh to also die, just as the 168 people he had killed that day. Mr. Welch tried everything he could over the next two years to blot out the pain. When the legal

discussion turned to the death penalty , Mr. Welch was in favor of it.

Then one day he discovered it was Timothy McVeigh's pain and vengeance that led him to co-create the horrific event. It occurred to Mr. Welch that he didn't want vengeance to ruin his own life as well. He discovered he was standing on one side of the huge, hard, cold door of forgiveness. Whether McVeigh was knocking or not, Bud Welch had to find a way to forgive, or be locked inside with his own pain forever.

What changed his mind? It was Project Forgiveness (www.theforgivenessproject.com). A group that was formed in the UK to care for, teach and nurture the victims, family and communities about the need and opportunities for healing and letting go. For Bud Welch, it was not an instantaneous fix – it came painstakingly, one step at a time, but it came. And when forgiveness began, he realized it was his own life that was also being set free.

The life of Bud Welch and his daughter Julie are in the past – and yet they are as close as the shootings in high schools, middle schools, elementary schools and the deaths of hundreds from violence of all kinds, including our local communities. We know the words that hurt and actions of thoughtlessness, moments of abandonment and even simple flippant words tossed at one another or quickly emailed to each other can escalate into loss of friendship, destruction of marriage and broken heartedness. When it happens, whether we are wearing the shoes of the forgiver or the forgiven, forgiveness opens the door to God's welcome and hospitality to our lives. We are not alone; God is with us in the pain and with us as we forgive.

God knew – God knows – forgiveness is one of the most difficult things we ever do. We fool ourselves to imagine withholding forgiveness keeps us safe from the risk of fresh pain, or at least we like to assume or pretend it does.

The need for forgiveness is not only personal, it is also corporate. As we witness revolutions around the world, with

hundreds of people shot down for standing up for what they believe, the theme of forgiveness almost seems out of place. Atrocity after atrocity, death after death – how can anyone overcome the odds of knowing peace again, instead of just retaliation?

There is always hope - God is with us. I believe we can learn even from the most horrific circumstances, and begin to practice and apply the healing journeys and skills of others in our own healing, our own journey to forgive. Who better to teach us than those who have been there first?

When was the last time you were pounding relentlessly on the door? What was it like when your gut was tied up in knots because all the power was locked either in your own hands or in the hands and heart of the other person? God gives us the power to forgive each other. As we forgive, God promises to also forgive us. But the very thought of it, whether the error was little or unbelievably huge, can tie us in knots – yet God promises never to leave us abandoned or alone. The Spirit is with us and we can learn about patterns and practices of forgiveness from others.

Many of you probably remember well the days of the fall of the Berlin Wall. It reminds me of the violence that continues to invade the world and invade us individually, even today. Not long after the wall fell, a pastor by the name of Alfred Radeloff of the ECU came to speak to pastors-and-lay-leaders in the Eastern North Carolina Conference of the UCC. Radeloff was on a tour of the U.S. to ask for prayers as his country, Czechoslovakia, as it was restructuring its government and society.

Radeloff told his listeners he was present during one of the many demonstrations in Prague two years earlier. During that rally, soldiers were given the order to shoot down from the buildings around the square in order to break up the illegal assembly. Many people were seriously wounded.

As he continued his story, he told the leaders that only a couple of weeks after this bloody occurrence, another crowd was gathered in the same courtyard – only by this time, the army had been disbanded and all manner of citizens were stepping up one-by-

one onto the dais in the center to “speak the truth” about what had happened during the nearly 50 years of totalitarian rule. Some spoke of how members of their family had ‘been disappeared,” others cried tears of joy for the hope they now had for a better nation.

Radeloff paused, and then said that in the midst of this very dramatic scene, a young man still wearing a tattered and torn military uniform came up onto the raised platform. He took the microphone just as all the others had done, took off his soldier’s cap and bowed his head. Then he told the crowd his name and rank. After a long pause he looked up and pointed at one of the windows high above the crowd and said, “Only a few days ago, I stood in that window and followed the order given to me to open fire on this yard. I am sure that I wounded some of those - some of you - that were gathered here that day.”

The crowd began to tense up and a few slurs were shouted out. The young man continued, “Please forgive me,” and the square went silent.

At this point, Pastor Radeloff pointed out that he was one of 12 or so clergy who had been taking turns managing the speak out. At this point in his story, Pastor Radeloff turned to the clergy and lay leaders he was recounting his story to and asked, “What would you have done if you were me that day?” His question seemed sincere, as if he was still listening for other’s ideas to see if he did the right thing. He went on, saying, “I did not know what to do. Then, almost automatically, I found myself putting my arm around the soldier and leading the crowd in the Lord’s Prayer.”

At first, only a few voices joined in with him. He continued to say the prayer out loud over and over again. It had been so long since Christianity was legal that many there those days were too young to have ever even attended a worship service, let alone know the words to the Lord’s Prayer. But slowly, he said, slowly the older ones voices got stronger, and the younger ones began to join in, learning the words that Our Lord taught his disciples, “Our Father, who art in heaven...”

If you find yourself wondering what you would have done, how on earth could forgiveness happen under these circumstances, then I encourage you to make time this week to go find the forgiveness project on the web: <http://theforgivenessproject.com/> There you will find newsletters and stories of restorative justice. There you will find new ways to understand both suffering and our responsibility to relieve suffering. There you find some of the ways others have found helpful to move toward understanding and peace.

There you may even find some discomfort bubbling up within you, when you read some of these stories and begin to quietly wonder to yourself – *“Should he have forgiven them? Is it wise to forgive in this kind of situation? Wouldn’t I still be holding onto anger if that had happened to me, or to someone I loved?”*

As you read through these stories of restorative justice and forgiveness overflowing, notice especially any discomfort that arises within you. Notice your own still-hardened resistance to forgiveness, even if it is forgiveness granted by someone you will never, ever know.

Be sure to bring our Lord’s Prayer with you – read it before, during and after – and see what blessings God will provide; then turn to your own prayer – one filled with Simple Honest Trust. Be persistent. Be shameless. May we all forgive one another as God forgives us.

To God be all glory, amen.

i *anaideia*, Luke 11:8, David Lose,
<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=1570>.

ii Amy Oden, *God’s Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-Hungry World* (Cleveland, Oh: Pilgrim Press, 2008), p.39.

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