

Wesley United Methodist Church
Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
Title: As We Forgive
Text: Colossians 3:12-17
Luke 11:1-13

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

I heard about a sign found on a church lawn that read, “No Trespassing Violators will be forgiven.” Undoubtedly whoever designed this sign was influenced by this part of the Lord’s prayer. “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

This part of the Lord’s prayer raises some interesting questions. Why do some churches use the word “trespass” and some use “debt”? What does it mean to be forgiven? Do we really need to forgive others? Suppose we don’t – then what?

When we think about the word “trespass” we generally think about it in terms of going onto property that does not belong to us, or where we do not have permission to be. Paul Meier in his book The Lord’s Prayer – Finding new meanings within the Language Jesus Spoke reminds us that to trespass is to invade the property, rights, personal space, or the dignity of another person. It really doesn’t matter whether we agree or disagree that our actions are harmful. Trespassing is stepping over the line that someone else has drawn and it carries consequences.ⁱ

You might have noticed that Luke’s gospel doesn’t use the word “trespass” at all. For that matter if we look in Matthew’s gospel, we also will not find “trespass.” Luke is more likely to talk about asking God to forgive our sins as we forgive others who have sinned or done wrong against us.

Most translations of Matthew's gospel use the words "debt" and "debtors." So I wondered where "Trespases" came from.

There's a lot of complicated stuff about the Aramaic, Greek, and Latin words and what happened in translation. It appears that "trespases" showed up in Matthew's gospel in the Tyndale translation in 1526. The 1549 Book of Common Prayer with its flowery formal Elizabethan English also used the word "trespases" as the "official" version for Anglican congregations. However, the King James Version in 1611 went back to the words "debts and debtors" that were in the very first English translation. The Catholic and Lutheran churches seem to use "trespass" while the Presbyterians and several others use "debts".

However, both the words "trespass" and "debt" have changed their meaning a great deal through the years and so you will find in some of the current ritual for the United Methodist Church "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

I think that the meaning behind the words is really more important than whether we use "trespass", "debt" or "sin" although we generally tend to go with what is most familiar to us and by extension, most comfortable. The bottom line is that no matter which words we use, we are asking God to forgive us for the things we have done wrong, and also making a commitment to forgive others when they have wronged us.

That's where it gets sticky isn't it? What does it mean to forgive? How do we do that? Does God really forgive us? Can we forgive ourselves – and can we forgive others? What happens if we don't forgive others? Does that mean that we are not forgiven?

That's complicated enough to more than fill a very large book and then still not adequately cover everything. It's also one of those subjects

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about which we do not always agree. So, let me try to do something with the Reader's Digest Condensed Version and at least my understanding of what I understand all this to mean. Because it does seem important to me that when we pray these words, we should know what we think we are praying.

I had a conversation the other day with a child who told me that if Adam and Eve had not sinned then we would all be living a happy life without any problems. Whatever one may think about the story of the Fall, if we examine it closely, we get amazing insights into the very nature of humanity. Being created in the image of God, humans have the freedom to choose, and in the story, God placed only one restriction upon them – do not eat of the tree of knowledge. The story tells us that the serpent told them that if they ate from the tree, they would be like God. (Gen 3:4)

The temptation is both simple and impossible to resist. It is the desire to be like God – it is the temptation of pride, the desire to be all-powerful and all-knowing. Don Underwood points out that much later, Jesus reversed that “original sin” by making the choice that was the opposite of Adam and Eve's. In Philippians, we read that although Jesus was in the form of God, he did not count himself as equal to God but rather humbled himself and took on the form of a servant, and became obedient even to the point of death on a cross. (Phil 2:5-8).

Paul, the assumed author of the letter to the Philippians, understood this when he wrote that he did not understand his own actions, and did not do what he wanted but did that which he hated. He understood that the temptation was to be like God rather than to be obedient to God.

Underwood says that this is what drives the choices that we make that are inconsistent with God's will for us. It is our pride and our self-

centeredness that lead us to this separation from God. It is only through repentance, through confession that we are restored or re-united with God. When we pray this prayer on a daily basis, we are reminding ourselves that not only do we sin, but that God has the power and the desire to forgive us and restore us to wholeness.ⁱⁱ

One of the biggest obstacles to the whole idea of forgiveness is our memory. While some of us may claim that our memory is not as good as it once was, we often have excellent memories when it comes to remembering things that we believe we have done wrong, times when we have hurt someone else, things that we somehow think that God can never forget and so cannot possibly forgive. Our memories can, and often do, keep us chained to the past and prevent us from wholeness. Our memories can have a destructive dimension to them when we are unable to forget something and keep replaying it in our head. Memories of our past can imprison us for life if we are not careful.

When we pray, “Forgive us...” we are trusting God, not only to forgive us but also to provide us with the spiritual power to accept that forgiveness.ⁱⁱⁱ

We may never forget the things that we have done, but we can use them to become wiser and more insightful. We can learn from our experiences and when we accept God’s forgiveness we can be released from the guilt, or shame of our failures. We may remember but we do not need to obsess and we do not to be held prisoner by those memories.

While God does forgive each of us our individual sins, once again, we are reminded by this prayer that the emphasis is on our individual lives as part of a community. When we talked about God’s will being done on earth, and asking for God to give us our daily bread, I reminded us that we

really cannot enjoy these benefits by ourselves. Underwood says it is not a “solitary experience” but rather a “solidarity experience.” He writes, “One person is not fed unless all are fed. One person is not free unless all are free. One person cannot live in the fullness of God’s forgiveness and grace without embracing the power of grace for all persons.”^{iv}

It can be very hard to accept God’s forgiveness for ourselves. We often find it harder to forgive ourselves. This is where we once again need to ask ourselves, “whether God is or God isn’t”. If God is, and if God forgives our sins, then who are we to go against God and hold on to what God has already released. When we refuse to forgive ourselves, even after God has forgiven us, we are succumbing to the temptation to be like God – we are trying to be greater than God by negating what God has already done for us.

As hard as this may sometimes be, it is like child’s play compared to what comes next. It is one thing to ask for forgiveness for ourselves but it is quite a different thing for us to forgive those who have hurt us.

I think this is where we encounter great differences in understanding. What does it mean to forgive someone else? What happens if we don’t forgive? Are there some things that just cannot and must not ever be forgiven? What does it mean when we pray, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Does it mean that if we do not forgive then we are not forgiven?

I’m always reluctant to get into this part of the conversation because I have experience working with adult survivors of childhood abuse and with victims of domestic violence. All too often these persons have heard from churches, you must forgive and I think that generally, this conveys some of what I think are dangerous and erroneous ideas of what forgiveness is. So,

if that is your story, please try not to shut me out before I have a chance to explain a little more.

Underwood tried to explain his understanding of this phrase, “as we forgive” by saying, that he thinks “our liberation from the sins we have committed goes hand-in-hand with our own graciousness towards those who have hurt us.” He goes on to say, “Notice that I said, ‘hand-in-hand’. I do not believe Jesus was saying that it is cause and effect, that if we forgive others God will forgive us. Rather, Jesus was making the point that we really are unable to fully receive the grace God offers freely unless we are willing to offer it as well.”

I want to be clear. There are some things that we find easier to forgive than others. Most of us find it relatively easy to forgive someone for being late or for forgetting something. We may find that we can forgive someone for saying something hurtful – especially if we understand that there were other things happening that might mitigate the circumstances.

However, I think that especially when we start talking about those things that are really hard to forgive – a betrayal, violence, abuse – when we talk about forgiveness it is important to be clear that we are not saying, “what you did was okay.” I don’t think that is what Jesus ever meant when he talks about forgiveness. It is extremely important to recognize the difference between forgiving and condoning. There are transgressions that cannot be condoned under any circumstances.

Having said that, I also believe that nothing can destroy a person’s life faster than holding on to grievances and painful memories. It is easy to confuse the concepts of forgiveness and condoning. If, in your mind right now you are thinking, “No, I can never forgive the horrible thing that was done to me.” I would invite you to change that heart rending painful cry to

“No, I will never condone such a horrible thing.” We do NOT and cannot condone those things that damage or destroy the spirit or life of ourselves or others.

The reason we do talk about forgiveness, even about those things we cannot and will not ever condone, is that unfortunately the truth is that the inability to forgive enables the perpetrator to continue to victimize us forever. The decision to forgive – but not to condone – is one of the ways that a person can say, “I’m not going to allow you to hurt me anymore. I will never condone what happened. But I will no longer be captive to these painful memories or to the hatred that has sapped so much of my emotional energy and my hope for the future.”^v

It is most definitely not easy to even think about forgiveness in those matters that cannot ever be condoned, and please, understand, that I am not trying to simplify things. When I talk about forgiveness for those things that cannot be condoned, it may also be that you will never speak those words to the person – it may be that it is not even safe to do so - but the forgiveness will take place within your heart. At some point in the process of becoming a survivor, rather than a victim, it becomes important to recognize that the person who has hurt us so much is a person who is also wounded. I believe that God wants us to be survivors, not victims, and that does involve a process of letting go, forgiving, and not being bound by what has happened in the past. Please, if I have said anything that causes more pain to someone who has experienced those things that must never be condoned, please forgive me, and if possible, please, let’s talk so that we can be sure you have not misunderstood anything I have said.

When we pray, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” I think we are making a decision about whether we will

live our lives today in a way that is burdened and hurt by the past, or whether we will live a liberated and joyous life that is empowered by God's promise of a grace filled future.^{vi}

In this prayer, I believe Jesus is reminding us that wholeness begins with us receiving God's grace. But that wholeness is not complete until we have extended that grace to others.

Grace and forgiveness are not easy and they are not cheap. They are powerful and truly possible only through the Holy Spirit working in our lives. When we are not able to forgive, either ourselves or others, we can begin by praying and asking God to help us forgive, or even to help us to even want to begin the process of forgiving. When we allow the Holy Spirit to begin to lift the heavy burdens that we are carrying, we will discover that we are lighter and more able to receive the love and grace of God in our lives.

“Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Amen.”

ⁱ Meier, Paul. The Lord's Prayer: Finding New Meanings within the Language Jesus Spoke. Loc. 623-635

ⁱⁱ Underwood, Don. Pray Like Jesus: Rediscovering the Lord's Prayer. Loc. 733-755

ⁱⁱⁱ Underwood. Loc. 787-806

^{iv} Underwood. Loc. 851

^v Underwood, Loc.978

^{vi} Underwood. Loc. 993