

Two Way Forgiveness

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

March 19, 2023 – 4th Sunday in Lent

Text: Matthew 6:9-15

Our text this morning is one I am sure you recognized. It is the text of the Lord's Prayer which we pray during worship every Sunday. This prayer taught by Jesus appears in the Gospels in two different places, in slightly different forms in each. In addition to this version from Matthew, the most well known, the prayer also appears in Luke although Luke's version is shorter. Interesting to note is that Jesus' teaching of this prayer in the two Gospels is under completely different circumstances. In Luke, he teaches the prayer to the disciples in response to their request to be taught a prayer like John the Baptist had taught his disciples. In Matthew, Jesus rolls it into a larger discourse on prayer in what we refer to as his "sermon on the mount." These differing circumstances are quite curious, considering how fundamental this prayer has come to be seen in the millennia after it was first taught. It's no surprise, then, to learn that some scholars think Jesus actually taught the prayer twice in two different situations. The Matthew version was earlier in his ministry while the Lukan version is shorter because by then he and the disciples had a well established relationship and way of working together.¹

Personally, I have always liked the story behind the prayer from Luke and the words to the prayer itself better from Matthew. However, like so many little points of exegesis that biblical scholars get hung up on, it really doesn't matter how the prayer came to be so much that it is.

And those scholars do tend to get hung up on little details the rest of us don't even think about. For example the word "daily" as in "give us this day our daily bread" proves quite contentious in some

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord%27s_Prayer

more scholarly circles because of differences of opinion in how it should be translated. It seems that in the oldest Greek versions of the prayer the word *epiousion* appears and is usually translated as “daily.” It seems that some scholars feel that “give us this day our bread for tomorrow” is a more precise translation of the phrase containing this problematic word.² But, really, how much does this matter? Not much, to me anyway. I think the main reason scholars argue about this sort of thing is because they know all too well that the way a particular word, like *epiousion*, is translated in one place in the Bible will inevitably have an impact on how it is translated when it appears elsewhere in the sacred text. When it appears in such an important text as Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer, the stakes are even higher.

Without a doubt there has been an enormous amount of scholarly work done on the Lord’s Prayer. It has been studied in great detail from the earliest days of scholarly study of the sacred texts. That’s because this prayer feels like a solid black line to Jesus. We can almost imagine ourselves sitting with the people on the hillside listening to every word Jesus is speaking, just like Matthew describes. No one had ever said these kinds of things before. Jesus was telling the people they could talk with God directly! They could pray themselves for themselves. Given the simplistic agrarian nature of their lives, it’s no surprise that Jesus knew instinctively that giving them words to say would be helpful. So, he does. What must it have been like when he first said, “pray then in this way ...” and he began to teach them the prayer.

The prayer itself is simple and straight forward. It begins with naming God with a particular identity: “Our Father in heaven,

² Ibid.

hallowed be your name.” God is our loving parent although not an earthly one, and God’s very name is holy.

“Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” This reminds us that God’s will, God’s desires, are always primary on earth where we live and in the heavenly realm which is God’s abode.

“Give us this day our daily bread.” We can expect that our needs for food – as well for water and housing – to be readily available as this is God’s will for us. But when they are not, this is not because God does not desire this for us. Rather, it is because human sin keeps it from some so that others can have more than they need.

“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” This phrase, believe it or not, has been one to offer the most consternation to scholars and others alike. Why? Because of the wording. What word is the best choice for what is to be forgiven? Debts? But isn’t that a financial term? How does that relate to what needs to be forgiven? Trespasses? Again, what does that even mean? When we think of trespass, we think of going someplace we shouldn’t be – going on to property where we are forbidden to go. That can’t be right. “Sins?” Well, that probably comes the closest to the meaning Jesus intended, or does it? Sins is what we use in our church for that reason, but even this word has its own baggage when it comes to this prayer.

Let me explain. In the late 1970’s, the debt crisis in Latin America was devastating entire nations, thanks to the unreasonable and greedy practices of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Virtually all of the many Latin American countries’ resources were being gobbled up by interest payments on loans made to develop these countries. The corporations taking advantage of the loans to build businesses and develop natural resources did not have to make the loan payments. The local citizens did and the World Bank

and the IMF demanded they be paid first. This meant that the populations of entire countries were pushed into poverty and hunger, so money could be sent out of the country. The situation became so dire that fears of peasant uprisings were widespread. That's why some church leaders began changing the words to the Lord's Prayer changing "forgive us our debts" to "forgive us our offenses." There was genuine fear that the people would take the prayer literally and demand that the government's debts be forgiven so they could actually have their daily bread.³ Imagine that.

"And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one." Here we often say the more traditional words from the KJV: "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." While it's true the more recent translation is undoubtedly more accurate, I think this is one time when the poetry of the KJV is right on point because we are tempted every day to live in ways which deny God's vision, God's hope, for us and the world. And we know all too well how present evil is after these past few years when mass shootings, Klan rallies, anti-Semitic incidences and misogyny are all increasing exponentially. We know all too well that evil lurks everywhere.

This is where Matthew ends the prayer but not where we do when we recite what is described by scholars as a "doxology" in the words "For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen." A doxology is simply a short hymn of praise to God, in this case a hymn that is spoken rather than sung. This final phrase is not in the original version of the text in Matthew or Luke which is why it does not appear in the Catholic versions of the prayers. Yet, it does follow a common liturgical practice of ending a part of the liturgy with

³ *The People's Bible*, comment by MDLT, ©2009 Fortress Press, p. 1419.

a doxology, also a practice in the synagogues of Jesus' time and our own.⁴ In other words, it's just a nice way of ending the prayer.

So now that we have reflected together on why the entire prayer is worded as it is, I'd like us to pause to consider more deeply what for me is the heart of the prayer – the admonition regarding forgiveness. We've talked about the arguments, scholarly and otherwise, over the wording here – debts, trespasses, sins, offenses. Frankly, I can see value in any of these words choices. Debts and debtors is probably the most difficult for our 21st century brains to process since we associate these terms with money, much like those folks from the World Bank and the IMF. But Jesus was using this term in a much broader sense. He meant that whenever you do something which harms another person in any way whatsoever, major or minor, you are creating a debt of harm which you then owe repayment for to that person. When we pray to God to forgive those debts, those instances of harm we did to someone else, we can do so only when we acknowledge that we have forgiven those people who hold debts of harm to us. In other words, we can't expect God to forgive us for hurting other people if we haven't forgiven the people who have hurt us. Just not possible. This phrase in this prayer Jesus taught makes clear that forgiveness is a two way street. If we want forgiveness, we have to offer forgiveness to those who have hurt us. We cannot expect forgiveness if we still harbor ill will toward people who have hurt us.

Why is this, do you suppose? It's asking a lot after all. I mean if someone has done something really bad to us, how can we be expected to forgive them? Maybe in more mundane situations like when someone says an unkind word to us, or cheats us out of something, maybe then, under the right circumstances we might be able to forgive them. But I can't be expected to forgive someone who does the

⁴ Op.Cit. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord%27s_Prayer

unthinkable, can I? Is God really saying I can't be forgiven if I don't forgive everything bad or wrong or sinful that has even been done to me? Sure sounds that way, with all this two way forgiveness talk! But it can't be, can it?

Well, yes and no. Yes, God does expect you – and me, all of us – to forgive the people who have harmed us. God does expect us to forgive the mean comments from high school, the blatant disregard for our feelings by some claiming to be our friends throughout our lives, the person who steals our identity, the relative who is always snarky at family celebrations. God just does. There are no qualifiers on God's forgiveness of us which means there are no qualifiers on how God expects us to forgive others. And, yes, this is sometimes impossible to do. Absolutely, no question. When someone harms us, intentionally or unintentionally, the hurt is real. The pain is real. The damage done is real. And here's where this two way forgiveness magic happens – when we find it within ourselves to forgive, it is a giant step toward the healing such harm creates within us. In these situations, forgiveness is like a healing balm that soothes the pain of the harm. When we find it in ourselves to forgive our debtors or those who trespass or sin against us, that forgiveness, tiny speck that it might be initially, creates space within which we can heal and begin to move beyond the harm perpetrated against us. Two way forgiveness, then is necessary if we are to leave the harms of the past behind us. If we cannot find within ourselves the capacity to forgive, even in some tiny way, our pain from the harm inflicted on us will remain an open wound in our souls, festering and poisoning every aspect of our lives.

What kind of forgiveness am I talking about here? When I talk about even a “tiny speck” of forgiveness, what do I mean? Well, just that, a tiny speck. If someone physically harms my child, or myself, or my husband in some way, of course my anger at such a thing will be

uncontainable. That's to be expected. That's normal. To forgive someone in that moment of initial awareness of the harm done is just not possible. And it might not be possible for a long, long, *long* time. But it is also never impossible. In its own time, the miracle that is forgiveness pokes through the dark muck of our despair like a tiny seedling reaching for the sun. It won't even look like forgiveness at first. It may be as simple as not hating the person as much as before. Or it may be that you can think about that person, or that situation, without wanting to throw up or hit the wall. Or it may be the pain has been replaced by a dull ache. Whatever it may present as, dear ones, is enough. That subtle shift in feeling, whatever it is, in my humble opinion, is a positive move toward the possibility of forgiveness. Letting go of the hatred, of the anger, of the pain done by the harm, is a big step toward forgiveness. Praying to God for help in forgiving is also an important part of this process. It is okay to pray, "God, I just can't forgive her/him right now. I just can't. But help me move in that direction just a little bit."

Just a little bit. That's all it takes when we're talking about the necessity of the two way forgiveness – this forgiveness of debts and debtors – Jesus teaches us. Of course, we still ask, why must we forgive in order to be forgiven? And the answer is a simple one: Because forgiveness is only forgiveness if it flows in both directions. If you feel like all the forgiveness in a situation, in a relationship, in a professional situation, needs to be coming at you, then, dear ones, you are not looking for forgiveness. You are looking for affirmation that you are 100% right and the other person is 100% wrong. That will never, ever cut it with Jesus. He is our model for extreme forgiveness, remember. He forgave the Roman soldiers after they nailed him to the cross. He forgave Judas after he was betrayed. He forgave Peter in advance for denying him three times. Jesus was all about

forgiveness on a level we can never match. But – and here’s the thing – he expects us to try every day. So it’s no exaggeration to say that this two way forgiveness is the miracle gift of Jesus we can still experience today. In fact, we must experience it if we are to truly know Jesus at all.

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” May we have the strength to try, especially when we think forgiveness is impossible because that’s when true healing begins. It’s also when God loves us into doing something we never dreamed possible. That, dear ones, is nothing short of a miracle, direct from Jesus to us. Imagine that. Amen.