

## Forgiveness

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany - Year C - 02/24/2019

Psalm Reading: 37:1-11

1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Gen 50:15-21, 2<sup>nd</sup>: Luke 6:27-38

It is tradition that when we Presbyterians say the Lord's prayer we say "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors". Not only is it tradition, but it is the most literal translation of the words from Matthew 6:12, which is where Jesus teaches the disciples the Lord's Prayer. As you know, the Gospels were originally written in Greek, with a little bit of Aramaic thrown in to catch some nuances. The Greek word used in this verse from Matthew is *ὀφείλημα* (*opheilayma*) and the dictionary definition is "that which is owed, or a debt".<sup>1</sup> So in this prayer, the thing that we ask forgiveness for is literally our debts.

The understanding of debts through much of history, for both those in Biblical times and today, is not only encompassed by ideas about owing money. A debt can be any kind of obligation. It is just that it is easiest to understand when we talk about it in terms of money because money is easily quantifiable. In common parlance we might say to someone who helps us that "I am indebted to you." In a court of law a suit can be brought against someone where we literally do try to quantify in monetary terms how much someone has been hurt by someone else. And the restitution that is ruled upon becomes a debt. So, when we talk about forgiving debts we really do mean also sins and trespasses.

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1 G. Abbot-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1948) 330.

When I was in Junior High school, my Dad was in the military, and we moved around quite a lot. So my siblings and I often jumped from school to school where we knew no one. We had to acclimate ourselves over and over again. Well, on one particular day when we had just gotten to a new school, between classes I was walking down an unfamiliar and crowded hallway carrying a couple of books. In spite of my uncertainty, I was trying hard to act and look as in place as possible. Of course I was wearing bell-bottom jeans and a silky shirt. My hair was meticulously combed so that it covered, what I thought were my over-sized ears. And I wore those black plastic glasses because I was near sighted and those glasses were the cheapest ones on the rack. But I am sure the determined look on my face and my stylish clothes fooled no one. I must have appeared an easy mark for anyone who wanted my milk money.

During that transit between locker and classroom I was stopped by a girl who was in one of my classes. She said, "Hey, can I borrow a quarter?" I was a little non-plussed because that was the first time a girl had talked to me at this school. I didn't have much time to think, so I turned the quarter over to her when she had promised to pay me back the next day. I went without milk at lunch, and felt a little disconcerted about the incident.

Well, I am sure you know what is coming. The next day I stopped her in the hall and asked her about this debt she owed me, she responded, "What quarter?" ....

*"What quarter?"*

Well, I stammered for a moment and tried to get her to recall the transaction as if there was a hope that I would get that quarter back in my pocket.

You know, the loss of that quarter irked me every time I passed that girl in the hallway. I think aggravated me because I felt embarrassed at having allowed myself to be taken advantage more than anything else. Looking back on the incident, I still wonder what she spent the quarter on. But more, I realize now how my reaction, my holding on to the anger over this case, hurt me far more than if she had taken every cent I had and given me a kick in the shins to boot. In truth, I was hurting myself by not forgiving this girl for the minuscule amount she had taken. But I also had trouble forgiving myself for being so naive.

Now you do not have to tell me how petty all this sounds. I cringe just to tell you about it, but I think it illustrates a point, and that is: in the grand scheme of things, almost any perceived offense against us by someone else is not worth holding a grudge over. It is not worth beating ourselves up over. Because that is what is happening when we hold a grudge, we feel we need to meet out retribution and get back something someone has taken from us. We are allowing our offended selves to obsess on something that has hurt us and therefore it continues to hurt us. By forgiving our debtors we write off the loss or the injury that has been afflicted upon us and we move on with a clean ledger. We don't have to feel anger or embarrassment every time we are reminded of this incident or that incident.

So forgiveness sounds like practical advice for those living in the here and now, doesn't it? Sometimes we tend to think of the teachings of Jesus as being these pie in the sky pronouncements that are only going to benefit us in the long run. And truthfully, when we are talking about the eternity of existence with our Triune God we have to take that into account. In our gospel reading Jesus does tell us, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven."

I think this does have reference to that time when we will come before Christ at the end of days. You know that God forgives us for our sins, but Jesus tells us that it is when we forgive that we will find forgiveness. I find it interesting how much we crave forgiveness, we want it from God. At the same time Jesus is our model. So it just makes sense that we should be forgiving as we expect to be forgiven.

You often hear me say that we are the hands and feet of God. We work to do God's work in the world. Could forgiveness be part of that work that we do for God in the world? Not that God would not forgive even if we do not, but by forgiving we lighten the load of those who have offended us, of those who are indebted to us, so to speak, helping them to see the possibility of grace from God. After all, if we sinful humans can grant grace, it is a certainty that God above may grant it and indeed does grant it and sometimes the awareness of that grace comes through us.

But you know forgiveness is one of the hardest things that you will ever do. No, it is not that hard to forgive those whom we love. It is easy to forgive our children, for example, but

people we don't like? Oh, yeah, that is really hard. And Jesus tells us, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?" (Luke 6:32) "But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the most high." (v.34-35a)

So how do we do this forgiveness thing? I think it is clear that we should recognize that this is often something we can't do on our own. We feel as though we have been hurt or wounded and a person owes us something, if nothing else, they owe us an apology. But like that quarter that was borrowed from me so many years ago that apology, that restitution, or compensation may never come. It is tempting to keep that item on our ledger books. It is tempting to obsess over a mere quarter of a dollar. And so our righteousness eats away at us. And the cost of pursuing this debt goes up and gets ever higher. But you know the way to get it off the books. The way to get rid of it is to bring it to God. Pray about it.

Say, "Lord, send your Spirit down upon me and take away this bitterness within my soul. Help me to forgive in the same way that you forgive all of my sins, both great and small." Then search your heart, and know that the Spirit of God is within you as it is always within you to help you to forgive. And whenever the thought of a debt to you comes into your mind, dismiss it with relief, because you no longer have to worry about it.

I am always talking about relationships. I think forgiving debts, sins, or trespasses, whatever you want to call them is one of the most important things we can do in preserving our relationships with people in the world, among those in the

church, among families and, of course, with God. I believe that this is why Jesus was so big on the subject. I mean forgiveness of sins, in one way or another, is among the longest threads we find in the warp and weft of the New Testament. It is important for the practical reason that it allows us to live in harmony with others in spite of the occasional unintentional insult or even intentional misdeed. Forgiveness, helps us to live with ourselves because it keeps us from becoming obsessed with retribution. Forgiveness keeps us right with God and helps us to live in his image. But most of all it is God's forgiving love for us that makes life as we know it possible. It is what cements our relationships with each other and with our Triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit.

Please bow your heads and pray with me...

Eternal and loving God, there is so much in us to forgive, for we act outside of the bounds of your commandments every day, in thought, word and deed. Without your forbearance and the forgiveness of those about us we would live in a constant state of turmoil and destruction. Help us to forgive others as you forgive us, and in this way may we help preserve peace and harmony among your people and in the world.

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