

Rick Snyder
 First Presbyterian Church
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Forgive Us Our Debts, as We Forgive Our Debtors
 Matthew 18:21-35

As we continue a series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer, today we encounter words that slip off our tongues so easily, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." But just like "Thy Kingdom Come; Thy will be done," or "Give us today our daily bread," this portion of the Lord's Prayer is a petition; it is a plea, an asking for help. For granting true forgiveness is neither quick nor easy!

Last week Chuck reflected on, "Forgive us our debts," on our own need for forgiveness. A good prayer model uses the acronym A*C*T*S, A is for Adoration, giving God praise; C is for Confession, admitting our sins, T is for Thanksgiving, naming our blessings, and S is for Supplication or Supply, asking God for help, to supply what we need. So confession should be a regular part of our prayer life.

Confession is good for the soul. It promotes humility. Since we all sin, who are we to judge others? Confession heals relationships, forcing me to reflect on how I hurt others. And since sin separates us from God, honest confession heals our relationship with God. For in truth, so much can't be undone – the reputation I steal when I gossip; the ways my greed keeps me caring about the plight of the hungry or homeless; the ways I live seeking my will, not "Thy will be done."

I know in my heart the truth of John's first letter, "*If we say we are without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*" Or In the words of *The Book of Common Worship*, "*Our sins are too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo.*" Before we forgive others, we need to understand the ways we fall short of the glory of God.

But this morning let me focus on the "how" question. The Lord's Prayer assumes that we will forgive our adversaries, "*forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*" So we are actually asking God to forgive us to the extent to which we forgive others. But what if someone has hurt and betrayed us deeply. Don't we empathize with what the Japanese Prime Minister says after the beheading of one of his countryman by Isis, "*This will never be forgiven nor forgotten?*" We can forgive more trivial matters. But how do we forgive a monster like Isis without demeaning the very memory of the victims or legitimizing injustice?

Forgiving those who hurt us is very difficult, sometimes agonizingly so. It is not Christianity 101; it is post-graduate work. Our spouse has an affair, betrays our marriage vows, and waltzes off with a new lover, leaving us blindsided and alone. It isn't fair! We devote twenty-one years to the firm, offering creativity as well as dependability. Then a "reorganization" sweeps us out the door without a "thank

you," let alone a gold watch. It isn't fair! We spend years developing a product, burning the midnight oil, finally edging towards profitability. Then a foreign company, far from U.S. patent laws, steals our intellectual property, threatening everything we've achieved. It isn't fair! Forgiveness is messy because life is messy. But let's listen to how Jesus approaches this matter:

Matthew 18:21-35

Jesus here is addressing the church. He tells us to model mercy, grace and forgiveness for a watching world. The church has, then, a "sacramental presence." We are to be a visible manifestation of God's grace, proclaiming in word and deed God's redemptive love. Though we differ in age, gender, worship style, and even theology, we love each other passionately because each of us is claimed by grace. So in a world that teaches "don't get mad, get even," we heed the words of Paul, "Be kind and compassionate, forgiving one another, just as in Christ, God forgave you." We do not retaliate or keep score. Rather we forgive.

Peter poses the initial question, "Lord, how many times should I forgive someone who hurts me?" Seven times." Peter is being pious. The law requires that an offender be forgiven three times. Peter is willing to forgive seven times. Jesus shakes His head, "Peter, forgive not just seven times, but seventy times seven. God does not limit His mercy, so place no limits on your mercy?"

Jesus continues, "Imagine that a comptroller loses \$32,000,000 in a risky real-estate deal. The next day the board summons him. Haltingly he explains what he did. To his shock, the board shrugs, "These things happen. You're forgiven." Scarcely believing these words, half-expecting a trapdoor to spring, dumping him into a piranha tank, he scampers back towards his office. On the way, he bumps into the janitor. He had lent the janitor \$20 to bet on Wisconsin in the March madness pool." "Where's my \$20?" he demands, bumping the janitor up against the wall. To make his point, he tells H.R. "Fire this turkey!"

But the board finds out, and they're furious. They forgave the comptroller \$32,000,000, and he roughs up the janitor for \$20. So BOOM! The comptroller's history and he's tossed into jail. And Jesus concludes, "This is how God will treat you unless you forgive your adversary from your heart."

Our parable is a parable of contrast. The king forgives a huge debt. The total annual taxes of the five provinces around Jerusalem total 800 talents. Our parable speaks of the forgiveness of 10,000 talents, in today's terms, millions and millions of dollars. The servant then refuses to forgive a \$20 debt. The point: God's mercy is unlimited, so our mercy should be unlimited as well.

Yes, it's easy to speak theologically about forgiveness. Forgiveness does bridge differences and reverse the flow of painful memories. We know the sheer joy of those who experience reconciliation. Author Philip Yancey tells of a meeting in

Russia between former KGB officials and Soviet Christians.

One of the Christians begins, "General, the KGB tortured many members of my family. I had to flee the land I loved. My dear uncle went to a Siberian labor camp and never returned. But you say you repent, so in the name of Jesus, I forgive you." Later the General confesses, "I've cried only twice in my life. When my mother died, and tonight." Forgiveness places us on holy ground. But how do we begin to forgive, when the pain is so deep and the memory is so fresh?

We begin by deciding to forgive. We have a choice--will the cycle of vengeance continue or will it stop? If anyone is justified in seeking vengeance, it is our Lord. Jesus embraces sinners and confronts the broken-hearted, He heals the sick and casts out demons. Everywhere He does good. But evil men seize Him, subject Him to a trial that has 43 illegalities, and crucify Him, as priests mock Him and soldiers gamble for His one earthly possession--his cloak.

Jesus can call down fire from heaven, or send for an angelic rescue. He can tell His tormentors, "You will burn in hell." Instead, as His life drains away, He chooses to forgive, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." But here we, I believe, need some nuance.

Forgiveness, for example, is not excusing, minimizing the damage that is done. People must be held accountable for their actions. I remember reading the obituary of a young woman named Stephanie, killed by a drunk driver. A poem, placed beneath her picture, read, "Tell McKenzie, I love her. Tell Susie to follow her dreams. Tell mom, I'll wait for you in heaven. Put Daddy's girl on my grave. Before I say goodbye; I didn't drink and drive. So why am I the one to die?"

Forgiveness is not tolerance. Lewis Smedes puts it well when he says, "Forgive me and you heal yourself. Tolerate everything that I do and you are in for a lot of trouble." To a Roman church that does not take sin seriously, the Apostle Paul insists, "We do not sin that grace may abound."

Forgiveness is clearly a process. Over time it tries to separate the person from the deed. It is a first, fumbling attempt to love the sinner while hating the sin. But when the hurt is so deep that we can't shake the trauma's memory, Lewis Smedes suggests that we forgive in four stages.

First, we hurt. At first the pain is so deep and so unfair that we cannot forget. It lodges in our memory and stings our heart. The pain is real and it must be endured. Second, we hate. Legitimate anger must be given voice. If we are not enraged by injustice, we are not fully alive. "Only an unearthly saint doesn't hate someone, sometimes." Forgiveness does not condone, nor does it absolve.

Third, we heal. We realize that to remain consumed with hatred diminishes us. Time does heal. Praying for our enemy helps. God's Spirit heals our heart, as

does resisting the temptation to play judge and jury towards our adversary. We heal when we try to understand our adversary. Except in the cases of outrageous evil like Isis, people act the way they do for a reason. Forgiveness is a process, not a clear-cut, one-time decision. As we heal, we no longer feel as deeply the need to punish those who have hurt us.

Fourth, sometimes we come together; sometimes we don't. We can't seek to reconcile with Isis, or with a chronic abuser, or with someone who will continue to do us harm. But we put the energy of hatred into moving on with our lives.

Finally, deep forgiveness usually requires God's help. Shortly after World War II, Karl, an American serviceman is sent to Okinawa for a one-year stint as a warehouse manager. Reluctantly he leaves behind his bride Edith, who fixes up their Boston home. Months pass, and Karl's letters grow infrequent. Then after months of agonizing silence, he blindsides Edith, "I'm divorcing you to marry my 19 year-old Japanese maid." Somehow, prayerfully, Edith decides not to hate. She hopes Karl will one day come home.

But Karl never comes home. He tells Edith of the birth of two daughters, and Edith finds it in her heart to send them gifts. Then Karl writes, "I'm dying of lung cancer. Akido, my wife, cannot care for our daughters. Will you adopt them?" Miraculously Edith decides to give her wayward husband one final gift--the gift of peace of mind. She will adopt the children and raise them as her own.

Still the story continues. Akido misses her children terribly. So Edith decides that her love for Karl requires one more thing. She pays for Akido to come to Boston. As the plane lands, Edith wonders, "What if I hate her?" The passengers disembark. The last person off the plane is a girl so thin and so small that Edith thinks she is a child. Panicked she clutches the railing. Edith prays and then calls, "Akido." The girl falls into her arms. And Edith thinks, "I prayed for Karl to come home, and now he has. Lord, help me to love Akido and her daughters."

Forgiveness is a decision! It is a process! It is a gift we give ourselves and our world that our souls not become bitter and our hearts hard. I'm always moved by these words of Frederick Beuchner:

Of the seven deadly sins, anger is the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of confrontations still to come, to savor the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back--it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.

And here, perhaps, is Jesus' answer to the Japanese Prime Minister, although dare any of us really stand in his place. I believe Jesus is saying something like this, "Should you excuse what has happened? No! Should you pretend it wasn't

so bad? No! Should you fight this cancer that is Isis? Of course. But don't allow bitterness, anger, and vengeance to corrupt your heart! Don't become what you so rightly hate! Don't let it rob you of your clear-thinking, of your love and commitment to justice, of the conviction that love is stronger than hatred." For forgiveness is the one path back to sanity and peace--peace of mind, peace of heart, peace in our homes and our community!