**“Both Given and Received”**

Rev. Clinton G. Roberts First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest March 27, 2022

“*And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”*

*-Matthew 6:12*

Last week, as Kristie preached on the Fourth Petition, “*Give us today our daily bread,”* we saw how Jesus first addresses our physical needs in the Lord’s Prayer: our daily need for food. The Fifth Petition addresses our daily need for forgiveness: a spiritual need which is humanity’s profoundest need, which all the evil and suffering and wrong we have inflicted upon each other since the dawn of history down to this present moment attests to, and will again tomorrow, until the Lord returns in glory. *“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors,”*  Jesus has taught us to pray.

The connection Jesus established between forgiving and forgiveness is in its own way equally profound. So profound and important, he placed this addendum after the Prayer in Matthew’s gospel: *“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Mt. 6:14-15).*

So in this Petition, we find embedded in the most important prayer we can make not only the things we are asking God to do, but the one thing that we are committing ourselves to do. *“And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us” (Lk. 11:4).* I wonder: are we really aware of the profound significance of this course of action we are committing ourselves to, each time we say this prayer? Have we really thought through the consequences of asking for God’s forgiveness, if we have no intention of offering that same forgiveness to others?

Jesus made a parable about that in Matthew 18: a story about a king who forgave his servant a great debt, only to learn that his servant refused to forgive a tiny debt owed him. The king’s response was neither gentle nor forgiving, to put it mildly!

So we find Jesus tying our need for forgiveness and our need to forgive into one and the same Petition—which is truly extraordinary! It’s as extraordinary as saying that loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength must also be tied to loving our neighbors as ourselves—something so extraordinary, we call that the Greatest Commandment.

II

But what about these three terms, *“sins,” “debts,” and “trespasses;”* all of which are used in translating the Lord’s Prayer into English?

1. “Sins” means, as Adam Hamilton speaks to in his book on the Lord’s Prayer—“sins” is *Hamartia* in Greek. *Hamartia* means *“missing the mark,”* like an archer missing the gold at the target’s center. Perhaps you have played darts, croquet, or even golf! There’s a lot of *hamartia* in the game of golf (as the language heard on the links attests to). Sin, as it is understood here, is not hitting what we’re aiming for—a sin of omission: of not doing what we ought to be doing.
2. The term *“debts,”* however, moves in the other direction. It’s more about our sins of commission: of doing those things we should not.

In First century rabbinic teaching, “debts” or *Opheilemata* in Greek, refers to something we owe to another: in this case, to God. Under the law, we owe God our obedience. So every time we commit sin, we incur a “debt” to God, which is added to our debit balance of sins. The only way to bring this balance down is to commit good actions, which are added to our asset balance of good. At the end of the day, we’d better want our assets to be greater than our debts, because our debts are building up a wall of separation between us and God—a separation that could be eternal. This is essentially a theology of justification by works.

The Psalmists, the prophets and the apostles all teach that we are sinners, carrying a weight of debt too great to repay by virtue of our own righteousness. But in this Petition, we are being taught by Jesus to ask God to cancel our debts in full. The implications of this petition are breathtaking. Who in the world does that? The mortgage company? The IRS? The bank? The answer is: no one. Except, perhaps, that prodigal father in the Story of the Lost Son who set aside all pride and dignity to run out into the road to embrace his sinful son with extravagant love and welcome, even before he could stammer out the enormity of his debt. That is this thing called GRACE—which we’ll return to later…

1. The third term for sin used in the Lord’s Prayer is *Paraptomata,* which is translated as “trespasses.” *“And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”* How many of you learned the Lord’s Prayer that way? “Trespasses” in this case means taking a misstep: as literally, “falling away.” It means taking a path you are not meant to walk on: a path where you end up not being where you ought to be. Contrast this with the 23rd Psalm: *“He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”* How many times have you heard someone say (or have said it yourself?) “How did I end up here?” That is what’s meant by “trespasses.” You wind up being someone, somewhere--that God never intended for you to be.

Whether or not we use the word “sins,” “debts,” or “trespeasses,” we are really speaking about one and the same thing: the evil that we do (in thought, word and deed) and the good that we don’t do (again, in thought, word and deed). As Paul states in Romans 3:21, *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* We all miss the mark. And so it becomes imperative for us to pray, *“And forgive us our debts,”* because, as Martin Luther put it, *“We are in the land of debts; we are up to our ears in sin.”* We are in need of a Redeemer: someone who will cancel our debts, and take our sins away.

III

It takes my breath away to realize that in teaching us this Prayer, Jesus was offering himself in each Petition:

* *“Father, glorify your name” (Jn. 17);*
* *“The kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt. 4);*
* *“Those who do the will of God are my brother and sister and mother” (Mk. 3);*
* *“I am the bread of life. Those who come to me will never hunger” (Jn. 6);*
* *“Father, forgive them” (Lk. 23)*
* And finally, *“Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1)*

It’s all right there—in the six Petitions which comprise the words of the Lord’s Prayer.

IV

I wish to conclude this morning by looking at how the Fifth Petition is meant to be practiced as we reflect on its second half: *“…as we forgive those who sin against us.”*

First: The Lord’s Prayer is a daily prayer: it was given that we might say it as many as three times a day—at morning, noon and evening—just as the early Church did. That means that this requirement to forgive others is a daily thing, too: as daily as eating. It’s meant to cover all those “little indignities” of thoughtlessness and unkindness, when the people we live with are uncharitable in some way or another. It requires patience, humility and forbearance without keeping score of wrongs. Henri Nouwen said, *“Forgiveness is what people practice who love each other imperfectly.”* No workplace will operate well, and no marriage or family will hold together long without it. Without the practice of forgiveness, it’s like running your car or truck without motor oil. You’re going to burn up and break down. You’ll end up sitting on the side of life, going nowhere.

Second: Some forms of forgiveness are harder than others: like when you’ve been deeply hurt, wronged or violated.

*\*tell the story of the unfaithful husband.*

Forgiveness is a process. Sometimes the hurt is so great, we are just not able to get there without Christ’s divine grace first flowing through us to help us do the forgiving: to bless those who have hurt us, and in the process, release us from the weight of bitterness as well.

*\*tell the story of the Amish Schoolhouse Shooting*

A year before Terri Roberts died of cancer in 2017, she was interviewed after writing a book called Forgiven. She spoke of how she reacted to the Amish Community’s announcement that they had forgiven her son. *“If they’re forgiving my son, do I forgive my son? I was so angry with what he had done, and yet the realization that if I chose not to forgive him, I would have the same hole in my heart that he had…I had to forgive him, because I did not want to live with bitterness…but it is not automatic or without pain when we forgive.”*

Third: The final practice of forgiveness has to do with self-forgiveness. People say to me, “*Pastor, I can forgive others, but I have a real problem forgiving myself.”* I hear this quite often, and I wonder, are these people (among whom I include myself) really saying, *“I have a real problem* *accepting that I’m forgiven?”*

Accepting forgiveness is hard. And all too often, the one person we’re hardest on is our self. Accepting God’s forgiveness requires a softening of our heart. It requires humility and setting aside our pride. It is a form of self-surrender.

In the end, perhaps this is why the petition for forgiveness must be tied to the commitment to forgive. Without the second, the first isn’t really possible. Our own decision to forgive releases the flow of grace in us—the same grace that can, in time, enable us to accept the fact that we are forgiven. Is our forgiveness, then, conditional upon our forgiving others? Jesus clearly says so. But he also said, on that day we call Good Friday, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* Reinhold Niebuhr said, *“Forgiveneness is the ultimate form of love.”* Our sin, with the sins of the world, have been forgiven once and for all time. Yet through the choice of forgiving others, we discover our own forgiveness as well. As the old hymn goes, *“O to grace how great a debtor daily I’m constrained to be.”*

Because it’s all about grace, isn’t it?

Let’s pray:

*Lord, forgive us our failures, and help us to joyfully believe and accept that, even as we forgive and release those who failed us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*