

Forgive Us our Debts

We have started our look at the Lord's Prayer by seeing the need for prayer. We saw that praying is nothing more than telling God what is on our hearts and being willing to have a conversation with God. Part of this, or for that matter any, conversation is to listen as well as to talk. Praying gives us that connection to the divine, to something that is more powerful than we are.

In looking at the specific prayer which Jesus taught us, we find that it is a prayer of submission, where we willingly give in to God's will and ask God's help in doing so. We saw that there was a tension in this prayer in that while we acknowledge God's transcendence over everything, we can also address God in an intimate fashion. While we do acknowledge God's blessings, we also recognize that we have not always used those blessings in a manner in which God wants. So, we pray for the systems that we have put in place to be replaced by a system which God wants. Last week, we saw the need for God's involvement in our everyday lives and that it is through God that we are given all that we need to live - time, talent and treasure.

This week, we turn to probably the hardest part of this prayer, the part which when we dwell on the words, are self-incriminating: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." It is hard because I know how I grant forgiveness, yet I expect God to be more gracious to me. The tension that was built into this prayer continues with this petition in that we know how we want God to forgive us and we know how we do or do not extend forgiveness. When we look at the original language, we see that Jesus used the word for debts.

To understand the debt which we owe to God, we need to go back to Genesis and the story of the fall of Adam and Eve. If you will recall, God told Adam and Eve

that if they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, then they would surely die that day. However, because of God's grace, they did not die that day, but the debt of their lives remained. In repaying that debt, God told Adam and Eve that they would return to the dust from which they were formed and not live eternally with God. Ever since then, that has been the debt which we owed to God.

In the parable which we heard this evening, that would be the size of the debt that the first slave owed to the king. In comparison, the debt that the second slave owed the first one was miniscule. The result of the parable is that the king, who represents God actually does forgive the first servant in the same manner in which this first servant forgave - by showing no mercy. But there is still a twist in which Jesus puts on this parable. That is, Jesus says that we must forgive from the heart. In other words, we should not forgive just so that we can earn 'forgiveness points' to get God's forgiveness. Jesus wants us to truly forgive and like God to remember their sins no more. That means forgiving and forgetting. We can learn from when others do wrong to us, but we should not be like Peter and keep track so that at some point we can get even with them.

This petition recognizes the circle of relationship within a community. When God gave the 10 Commandments to the people, not only were there instructions on how to relate to God and one another, but there was also the indication that those relationships are interconnected. That is, our relationship with God influences our relationships with others and vice versa. In this petition, we are asking God to forgive us, that is we are asking to God to renew our relationship with God in the same way we renew our relationships with others by forgiving them. It is in this interconnectedness of relationships that we find true community. We need our relationship with God to be right so that we can have a right relationship with our

neighbors and we need a right relationship with our neighbors to have a right relationship with God.

But, what of those relationships that are not right? That is where sin comes in. Our original sin was against God when Adam and Eve gave in to the temptation of the devil and convinced us that we could be like God and created the doubt God was holding something back from us. In short, sin is when we turn away from God and following God's will and pursue a path of our own wants. This original sin led us to sin against our neighbor as evidenced by Cain's murder of his brother Abel. Cain did not have a right relationship with God which led to jealousy of Abel and his murder. However, nowadays, we have explained away the concept of sin to such an extent that it seems as if there is no sin at all. Acknowledging sin acknowledges our responsibility in sinning and we have found convenient ways to not accept this responsibility. We do not see our actions as sinful, but rather our actions were the result of being too immature, or underprivileged, or frightened, or sick, or we weren't raised the right way to act differently. Therefore, we are no longer responsible for our actions, but it is someone else's fault and responsibility. If we think that we do not have any sin, then we do not need to seek forgiveness, nor do we need to grant forgiveness to others. There is much more that can said about forgiveness, but just let it suffice that where there is forgiveness, there is hope that there is and will be something better for us. The ultimate hope is something that was restored to us by Jesus on the cross which erased that debt of death and we are given the promise of eternal life with God. Until we reach that goal, we do have the hope of better relationships with others as we forgive them.

Some have taken the approach to understanding this petition as sort of a reverse psychology. Using the example of the parable from the Gospel reading, the

first servant should have learned about forgiveness from the king and extended that same kind of forgiveness to the second servant. In this interpretation of this petition, we acknowledge God's ability and willingness to forgive us of a huge debt. We have the hope that we can learn from this example of divine forgiveness and extend our forgiveness to those who have wronged us. Instead of asking God to use the same criteria which we use to grant forgiveness, we want to be able to grant forgiveness in the manner in which God does.

In the previous petition, when we are asking God for our daily bread, we are asking God to provide those things necessary for our physical bodies to survive. In this petition of forgiving our debts, we are asking God for forgiveness so that our souls may survive. Just as we ask God for daily bread; we should, as Martin Luther encourages us, seek forgiveness of our sins on a daily basis, remembering our baptism as a daily dying to sin. We should also learn to apply this concept to our neighbor and become willing to forgive them of their trespasses against us, not counting how many times we are wronged, but having the open heart to want a right relationship with others and with God.

As is implied throughout this prayer, it is something which we realize that we cannot do on our own, but we need God doing it for us. As we continue our Lenten journey, may the Holy Spirit lead us in the ways of forgiving our neighbors from our heart, restoring the relationships God wants us to have.