

“The Necessity Of Forgiveness”

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Matthew 6:7-15

I want you to think back for a moment to your middle school social studies class. I’m expect that many of us remember learning about the basic human needs. They are usually listed as food, water, shelter and clothing. These are the things needed for our survival. They are the things in life, that we might refer to as “our daily bread.” I believe that they are the things that Jesus had in mind when he taught his followers to pray and offer up the petition that had been translated into “give us this day our daily bread.” Yet as we all know, the prayer of Jesus does not stop there, as if this was all that was needed for our survival. The prayer continues with the petition “forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors.” For Jesus, the need for forgiveness is something that is just as essential for human life as is our daily bread.

In fact, one might say that forgiveness is the central aspect to this prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples. It’s right there in the middle of things. There are only three petitions in the prayer and the middle one is a petition for forgiveness. Moreover, Jesus reinforces the need for forgiveness and what it means to his disciples in the verses immediately following this prayer he taught. He says to his followers, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

According to Jesus, each day we ought to prepare ourselves for a life of forgiveness. Which sounds to me like forgiveness is not just an occasional thing, something that we use in order to settle disputes. But forgiveness is a way of life. And not only is forgiveness a way of life, forgiveness is something that has a life. It has a movement, it is a spirit at work. Just as our lives are sustained by water that hydrates us, or food processed to give nourishment, just as we inhale and exhale oxygen to feed our red blood cells. So is there a movement in our lives fed by an energy that is given and received when we live to forgive.

This need and power of forgiveness was central to the life and well being of Christian communities from the very beginning. In the Didache, the small body of teachings that was used as an instructional guide for the followers of Jesus in the first decades of the church,

Christians were required to pray this prayer of Jesus three times a day...every day! They were to utter those words “forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors” at least 21 times a week or over a thousand times a year! Over a thousand times a year is probably about right when it comes to the need to extend and receive forgiveness in this world. In a world where it is so easy to cause offense and to offend others. On a daily basis we hear in the news of countless ways that people offend or feel offended. God knows the recent election in the U.S. and now as we find ourselves in the midst of the settling dust of the aftermath, that there were many things said and done and still being said and done designed to offend and cause offense. It’s mind boggling really. I have begun to think that praying for forgiveness a thousand times a year, would hardly suffice.

There are also things we can sometimes say and do in this life, that were never intended to cause offense, even though they sometime can be interpreted that way. For example, this past week in our prayer group, as we were reflecting on this text for today, one of the participants in the group shared a story about how many years ago, he had made a comment that a number of people had found offensive, even though that was never his intention. He wasn’t trying to hurt anyone, yet in the aftermath, he found himself apologizing for what he had said. What hurt even more was that in spite of his contrition, others just weren’t willing to accept his apology. Some did and some forgave, but others did not and instead chose to hold a grudge. As this man said, it is something that haunts and hurts him to this day. It ended up becoming a source of regret. And for me a great example as to why Jesus issued in his prayer a petition for forgiveness that comes from God...sometimes human forgiveness is not all that forthcoming.

After all, as we know in life, the need for forgiveness comes as a result of our relationships with other human beings. We risk relationships because we need one another to survive...even when we offend or are offended, we still need others to survive. Unless you are completely narcissistic and self involved, you know what forgiveness can mean. Yet, we also know that even when we ask for forgiveness from one another, that at times forgiveness will never appear. We humans are not like the God described in the Scriptures as being, “slow to judge and quick to forgive.” Instead we can be quick to judge and slow to forgive.” That’s what

the man in our prayer group experienced. I know that it is something that many of us have experienced in our own lives. As far as I'm concerned, you haven't lived if you have never experienced the wrath of others. We have all felt the pain of those who have chosen to not forgive.

It can be tough for life to go on, until we know the gift of forgiveness. As a word, forgive literally means to let go, to set free. This is what it means to for-give. Allowing one to breathe again, to love again, to live again. It's like that old story about a certain man who had the habit of wearing a very heavy winter coat on a blistering hot summer day. He would walk around with the sun beating down on him, beads of sweat pouring from his forehead and his breathing was labored. When asked why he wore such a heavy coat, he replied, "Because it feels so very good when I take it off." And that my friends is the invitation we have when he forgives others, we have the ability to relieve them of a great burden and source of discomfort. When we forgive, we participate in an act of genuine healing and comfort. And this shouldn't just make another feel better, it should make us feel good too. Practicing forgiveness can help any one of us fulfill that childhood dream of making the world a better place. Forgiveness is an actual way we can improve the quality of human life.

Yes, it can be tough to forgive. Especially when you believe you have been deeply offended or hurt. Or you believe someone has done something to hurt someone or something you care about. We know that forgiveness is not a duck's back. Being a "forgiving" person does not mean a water-rolling-off-the-back kind of disengagement from people or situations that hurt us. Forgiveness requires deep involvement with the offending party and situation. It means feeling the full brunt of the hurt. It also means we don't necessarily have the strength to forgive on our own. Forgiveness requires a degree of faithfulness in the power of forgiveness itself. It's no wonder that Jesus says, "Forgive us our debts or our trespasses, as we have also forgiven our debtors or those who have trespassed against us." There is an act of faith involved when it comes to practicing forgiveness. It's believing in the faithfulness of a God who desires to forgive us our debts and trespasses.

I think it's important for a moment, to pause and reflect on what Jesus is referring to when he uses the words debts or trespasses. In the original Greek, the word is one that literally

means to get what is owed or what is outstanding. This is what so often stands in the way of a lack of forgiveness in our lives, is that even when we receive an apology or a heart felt “I’m sorry” from another person, is that sometimes that is just not good enough. We want more. This is why back in Jesus day, when people went to the Temple to atone for their sins, they would sacrifice animals. They would literally make a blood sacrifice because that is what they believed was required for forgiveness. They believed the demand was for blood. It harkens back to that Old Testament standard for justice that was an “eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Which certainly was an improvement over situations that would often escalate, when someone demanded more in return as a way to exact real justice. However, the problem is that we know that we can never truly right the wrong, no matter the compensation, because what’s done is done. We cannot turn the clock back to the way things used to be. We cannot undo the offense. Sooner or later we *have* to rely on forgiveness if we are to move on. We have to let go.

This to me is at the heart of that dramatic moment of Jesus when he hangs on the cross in his crucifixion -hanging there as an example of what happens when the crowds start to cry out for blood. What we witness in Christ’s crucifixion is an even greater injustice being exacted on an innocent man. Yet, what was done was done. Jesus could not be un-crucified. Instead, Jesus, feeling the full brunt of the hurt, utters the words, “Father Forgive them for they know not what they do.” In that moment the ultimate realization is that it is only forgiveness that can allow the relationship to continue. It is only forgiveness that can overcome the chasm that had been created between the people and God’s very self.

My friends, there is a great deal of grace to be had in our lives when we realize forgiveness’ full potential...and when we realize that there are times in life when we and others “know not what we do.” We “know” not. You see, something else that can stand in the way of forgiveness and a forgiven heart, is that there are times when we think we know everything. We think we know the cause of everything. Ultimately we believe we can easily determine who it is we should blame and who we should not forgive. I believe that this human tendency is why we have the third petition in the Lord’s prayer that says, “and do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.”

This petition goes back to a theological understanding we can trace even to the beginning chapters of the book of Genesis, to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. You may remember that story, how Adam and Eve are given the freedom from God to eat from and enjoy all of the trees in the Garden, except for one tree. Remember what that tree was? It was the tree that contained the knowledge of good and evil. It was the tree that the Devil, or Satan, or the power of evil, call it what you will, had tempted them into tasting. It wasn't an apple that Adam and Eve bit into, yet as prototypical figures of we humans, it was a taste of the knowledge of good and evil. The knowledge they believed gave them the power to judge others, even one another. They were tempted and tricked into believing that they could know it all and that they didn't need God.

Many people in our world fall into this trap. Not long ago, I had someone come to me who was despairing because she had felt challenged by something another person had said to them. This other person, had been questioning and challenging the despairing woman's faith and said, "I don't need God. I can be good without God." (There is actually a movement that goes by that slogan these days..."good without God.") And my response to this person who had been challenged was to say yes, this very well may be true, someone can be good without God. Yet I also know that at some level, for us as Christians and as a people of God. It's not about being "good," it's about being "forgiven."

To think we know it all and have an infallible ability to know good from evil, is to once again fall into temptation of wanting to be the judge. This can lead to all sorts of evil and hurt and accusations. The reality is that we may never know -especially "know what we do...or what others do." There is a line in Psalm 37:8 that says, "Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it leads only to evil." When we seek to be the sole judge of others and even ourselves in this world, it leads only to evil, an evil from which we need to be delivered.

A good example of how sometimes we just don't know it all is revealed in a story a relative of mine told me. It concerned a time he and his wife had been given the opportunity to use a cottage one weekend that belonged to some friends of theirs. When they arrived at the cottage, they came across quite a mess in one of the bedrooms. Apparently some squirrels had found their way into the cottage and decided to use one of the beds as their dining room table.

Wanting to take care of their friend's cottage, his wife dug the vacuum cleaner out of a closet and got to work cleaning up the mess. However, she didn't get very far, for at the very moment she plugged the vacuum cleaner into the wall and turned it on, the lights went out and the power shut off. She became incredibly concerned. Her husband questioned her saying, "What did you just do?" They then went to the breaker panel, checked all the breakers, they could not figure out the problem. Although they were both sure that it was the result of her plugging in the vacuum and turning it on. Needless to say, they had "words." And she openly confessed that she could not help but feel responsible at one level. However, as it turned out, her plugging the vacuum had nothing to do with it. Coincidentally, they learned afterwards, a transformer on the grid had blown which had caused the electricity in the whole vicinity of the cottage to go out. They both felt kind of silly when they learned that. Especially given their behavior.

You see, sometimes we think we know the reasons for everything in life, especially when things go wrong. We can have regrets or believe others should regret their actions...but sometimes maybe what is needed is a little more humility. In this world of ours and in the lives we live and share, there are just so many moving parts, so many things in motion, so much that we cannot see and cannot know. What our relationships and this world needs instead is forgiveness. God knows this -God, the one who does know everything and suffered greatly in Christ to show us. Our relationships with our children, our spouse, our friends, our neighbours, our enemies and one another are most dependent upon forgiveness for continued health and well being and life. Forgiveness is the best any human relationship can hope to achieve.

My friends, perhaps we will do what Norman Peale recommended in his outline on how to practice forgiving – particularly when it comes to saying the Lord's prayer. Peale says, "Repeat the Lord's Prayer, inserting your offender's name... and say, "Forgive me my trespasses, as I forgive (and say the name)." We may need to say it three times a day and over a thousand times a year, but we need to say it, it's just as important as our daily bread. Thanks be to God.