

Forgive Us Our Debts

Text: Matthew 6:9-15

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on February 28, 2021

In 1955, a woman named Jill Jackson-Miller was finally able to put a decade of suicidal depression after a difficult divorce behind her. She credited the “life-saving joy of God’s peace and unconditional love” for bringing her out of that traumatic period, and in gratitude she wrote a song for the International Children’s Choir called “Let There Be Peace on Earth,” one of the greatest feel-good songs of the 20th century. Perhaps the most important line of that brief song is the one that occurs three times “Let it begin with me.” What that difficult decade had taught Ms. Miller was that peace flows from the inside out. Like with the other fruit of the Spirit we’ve talked about, it exists within us as a divinely-planted seed. But for that seed to produce the actual fruit of peace in our lives, and by extension to the world, it has to be carefully tended, nurtured and grown within ourselves. Unless and until we are at peace with ourselves, we cannot be an agent of peace for others in any lasting way.

Entire industries are now devoted to helping people find and grow that seed of inner peace, but here I want to focus on one particular spiritual discipline that is an essential ingredient to nurturing peace both within ourselves and in every community in which we find ourselves: the practice of forgiveness and its close companion, confession.

From a Christian perspective, the biggest focus of messages about forgiveness tends to be on Jesus as the mediator of God’s forgiveness of our sins. And that’s crucial. But I find that we often feel such a sense of relief that our own sins are forgiven that we fail to connect God’s forgiveness of us to our obligation to pass that gift of forgiveness along to others, despite the fact that it’s right there in the Lord’s prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive* those who trespass against us.” In Matthew 6:14-15, right after Jesus teaches that prayer to his disciples, he doubles down on that part of the prayer: “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.” Ouch. Turns out hypocrisy is more of a problem than maybe we thought.

You could say that line in the Lord’s Prayer is the heart of the Golden Rule—we should treat others the way we want to be treated. If we want God’s gift of forgiveness for our own transgressions, we should show good faith in extending forgiveness to others. That’s a theme in Old and New Testaments alike: we are judged by the same rule we use to judge others; the measure we use is the measure we receive. Basically, we get what we give; so treating others the way we want to be treated is not just a divine mandate, it’s a pretty smart practice.

If you’ve visited in churches of other denominations, you may have noticed that when the Lord’s Prayer rolls around, sometimes people say “forgive us our debts” or “forgive us our sins” instead of “forgive us our trespasses.” The closest meaning of the word in Greek is that of a financial debt or other obligation, so if you had “debts” on your bingo card, you win! Although we should also be clear that we can owe debts that are not monetary. Jesus is using the economic term to describe a broader concept of sinful behavior when we refuse to give others what they are due. That might be money, but it could also be respect, dignity, honor, freedom, compassion, understanding—the list can go on and on. “Trespasses” and “sins” are not bad translations—Jesus is not trying to be the Fed chair here and talk about monetary policy. But I think understanding the concept of debt in relation to what it means to forgive can help clear up some misunderstandings.

Having forgiveness appear in the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus gives as a model for all prayer, implies that we're going to have to cultivate both the ability to confess and to forgive on a regular basis if we are to live a faithful life. It's not going to be some rare occurrence in response to only horrific acts. We should be clear, however, that simply incurring a debt is not the problem. As human beings in relationships of all kinds—as individuals, communities, nations, or whatever—we all wake up every day as both debtors and benefactors. We all wake up owing others respect, attention, compassion, or help as the situation warrants; and we all wake up deserving of those same things from those we encounter.

If we don't receive what we are due or if we don't give what is due to others a conflict is born, and if we don't catch it and fix it in the moment, confession and forgiveness is the way to keep the conflict from growing and spiraling out of control. Maybe that's why Jesus encourages our daily prayers to include both asking for and granting forgiveness. We can't unsay or unhear the hurtful word; we can't unwind or un-feel the emotional gut punch when respect is due but not given. But by daily asking for God's forgiveness and promising to pass that gift along to others, we become more skilled at doing it in the moment during our day to day lives. We learn to address conflict early and constructively and, as a result, life is more peaceful for everyone.

Regularly doing that emotional housecleaning with the small slights and offenses we both commit and encounter every day also helps us when we're facing the really big stuff, whichever side of a major offense we find ourselves on. When facing the large injuries of life, the betrayals, abuse, gross negligence, abuse of power, and deadly force that deprive others of life, safety, freedom, health, or the ability to meet their basic human needs; the basics of understanding what forgiveness is and isn't can be helpful.

Forgiveness means release of any debt *beyond what can be repaid*. If you break into my house and take my stuff, forgiveness will not be an option until you've either returned the stuff or proven that you can't return it and show that you are willing but unable to compensate me for it in some other way. Once you've done what you could to express regret and make concrete amends, then I can consider forgiving the losses that can't be repaid, including my sense of violation, loss of safety, and perhaps betrayal if you were not a stranger to me.

Now let's go bigger. Consider what the United States as a country has taken from the Indigenous tribes of this land or from those we enslaved for hundreds of years and who still can't feel safe from violence even eating ice cream in their own living room. On the one hand there is no way that we as a country can fully repay what is owed. The atrocities are too great and we can't go back in time and get a do-over.

But many seem to think that the country is somehow owed forgiveness when there has barely been even an acknowledgment, let alone a confession of the egregious harm done to Indigenous and African Americans, harm that continues to this day. It's also clear that while we can't pay the debt we owe in full; there are still plenty of things that we could do as a nation to make some degree of restitution for our past sins and to stop the ongoing harm. That we can't even talk about that without a fight shows me how far away we have drifted from understanding the nature of Christian confession and forgiveness.

While Jesus definitely points us to forgiveness as the Christian way, no one, including God, owes anybody forgiveness. If I'm demanding that someone forgive me, I'm doing yet more harm and piling onto the debt I already owe. By definition you can't owe forgiveness. True forgiveness can only be given as a gift; it isn't a wage we are required to pay. Forgiveness is a form of our old friend from a couple weeks ago, *chrestotes*—that undeserved kindness and compassion that is generously given out of a good and humble heart. It's the way that God loves us in spite of ourselves, not because we've been such

stellar, stand-up folks. It's the heart that's willing to reach down and pull us out of the deepest pit, even if it's a pit that we dug and willingly jumped into ourselves.

But, even when coming from God, it doesn't mean that we aren't expected to do better before tasting of the sweetest fruit of a relationship. It doesn't mean we can demand it when we haven't even confessed to the enormous debt we owe or proven our inability to pay up whatever we can. Forgiveness doesn't require the relationship to be restored to what it was before. To forgive is an act of mercy that agrees not to try to exact a payment that someone is unable to make. It brings a relationship from conflicted to neutral, but not necessarily to where it was before. You can forgive an abusive spouse or family member while still leaving the relationship to ensure your safety. To forgive is not to forget; we often need to remember to keep ourselves safe in the future. To forgive is also not to say what happened didn't matter or is somehow "okay." If whatever happened is really okay, then forgiveness isn't necessary in the first place.

With all of that said, there are reasons beyond Bible passages that we might consider giving the gift of forgiveness, even though what we really might want is to open the trapdoor to hell and push the other party in. Oprah talks about a guest on her show who described forgiveness as "giving up the hope that the past could be any different." When seen that way, to forgive is to take a huge step toward inner peace and freedom. Forgiveness cuts the cord to all the grudges and all the "if onlys" of our lives. Yes, the past might have been different with different choices—either on our part or on the part of others. But that past can't be changed now, and we won't find peace until we can give up the desire to cling to what might have been and open ourselves to what possibilities lie ahead.

If we choose to forgive, we're cutting the cord and setting those on both ends of it free. We're saying, it's done; it's over and, like Oprah's guest said, we give up the hope that the past could be any different and let it go. Hanging onto a debt that can't be paid and using it as a cudgel against someone over and over won't change the past and it will deprive us of any peace in the future. Forgiveness cuts the chain that is keeping those on both ends of it bound in the conflicted past and allows everyone to finally know peace.

But it's also important to remember that we can't be expected to forgive something that's still happening. Forgiveness is making peace with something that has happened—past tense. If harm is a regular occurrence, forgiveness is inappropriate. If someone beats you to a pulp, you might come to forgive them at some later date if their remorse is sincere or if you are out of harm's way. But you don't try to forgive every punch as they land one after the other on your face.

Until the harm has stopped, peace will be delayed, and stopping that ongoing harm is the role of justice. Justice steps in to stop the harm and ensure that whatever part of the debt can be repaid is repaid. And with those conditions met, forgiveness can flow freely and break the chains that bind us in the perpetual conflicts of our past.

Let there be peace on earth—by all means yes. But let it begin with my confession of wrong; my willingness to let go of what might have been and forgive; my determined work for justice that will create the conditions for forgiveness to occur. Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me. Amen.