

SERMON: AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS

Have you ever had the experience of feeling like God is delivering a message to you by smacking you with a frying pan? I had one of those moments last summer.

As I lead the recitation of the Lord's Prayer after the Children's Message, I find that sometimes, I'm saying it on auto-pilot, not really paying as close attention to those oft repeated words as perhaps I should.

So when, on one summer Sunday morning, I said the words "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors", the thought came into my head, or perhaps it really was God with that frying pan saying to me...."but do you, Lorinda? Do you do that?" For the rest of the service, I tried to ignore that voice calling me to reflect on that line in that very well-known prayer.

Those words have haunted me for months, because to be completely transparent, the idea of forgiveness is the one that I struggle with more than any other part of our faith. I must admit that when I feel that someone has wronged me or someone I care about, forgiving them has never been my first thoughtnor is it my second thought, and often not even my third.

Most of you know that the major component of our summer Vacation Bible Schools has been an emphasis on the very important issue of bullying. One summer, we decided to give each of the five days a different Character trait, and one of the days was all about forgiveness.

In researching lessons on forgiveness, I discovered that there are several different ways that other denominations say that line of The Lord's Prayer: Some, as we know, say "forgive us our trespasses as

we forgive those who trespass against us". That's the way I learned it as a kid.

Other versions word it this way: Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us. And this: Forgive us for doing wrong, as we forgive others.

Yet another translation says: Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

But let's try adding some words to it. Forgive us our sins, in the same way we forgive those who sin against us. Uh-oh.....now that causes us some discomfort doesn't it? Do I do that? Do you?

And then a poster that I ordered for VBS arrived, and after reading it, I couldn't get it out of my mind. It said, "Forgive others as quickly as you expect God to forgive you."

Forgive others as quickly as you expect God to forgive you."

Each week, we join together in a prayer of confession, and ask God to forgive us for the wrongs we have done. And then we hear the comforting assurance of pardon. But how would our forgiveness from God be if God forgives OUR debts as we forgive others?

For you see, when we say "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors", what we are saying is that we want God to forgive us in the way and amount that we have forgiven others. Yikes!

And what if we haven't forgiven someone? What then? What if you are struggling with something that you've experienced that seems to be unforgivable? How many of us have said "I'll never forgive them foryou can fill in the blank." I have certainly said those words.

So here's the thing....to forgive does not mean to pretend something never happened. And while you, and I, can't actually forget or unknow something, is it possible to stop holding it against someone?

The phrase "forgive and forget" does mean that you no longer hold it against the other person. I saw it described this way: It is similar to the way in which you might forgive a monetary debt: You may decide to tell the person that you have "forgiven" the debt. That doesn't mean you never lent the money. It just means you have decided it is not necessary for them to pay you back.

In other words, you no longer hold them responsible for the debt. Forgiveness of slights or hurts can be thought of in this way. This does not mean it is easy to do, just that it can be done.

I mentioned that forgiveness does not always come easily to me. As I said, if someone causes a member of my family, or a dear friend, pain, I find it VERY hard to forgive that.....and if truth be told, sometimes even after the family member has resolved the conflict, I'm still holding on to my anger, and my desire for revenge. Do any of you have that same experience?

As I continued researching the concept of forgiveness, I found myself saying "But, wait a minute..." or "Yes...but...." And "Okay....but...."

I realized that I needed to continue to search for what forgiveness is not. And that's where a sermon by an unnamed author writing on an online site called sermons.com helped.

The author began by referencing the terrible tragedy of West Nickels Mines, where a young husband and father fatally shot five young Amish girls. That was stunning, and horrific, but a single word emerged in ALL of the stories written about the incident: forgiveness. The forgiveness of the Amish community to the man and the family of the man who committed this terrible, terrible crime.

The author pointed out that the word forgiveness had certainly captured the attention of the media. What, they wondered, did it mean?

Did it mean that those so powerfully impacted by this horrific incident should actually forgive this man? And how can that make sense? Would there be no justice for him? And how can justice and forgiveness both be part of a situation like this one?

And that's where I found myself. I needed to understand and come to terms with the issue of forgiveness. Because, friends, whether I like it or not...whether you like it or not....forgiveness IS part of God's plan, and when properly understood, will not contradict God's justice.

Forgiveness is not a compromise of morality. Don't think for a moment that God could or would confuse moral responsibility with grace and forgiveness. God's justice ensures that the sinner will not get away with their sins-one day they will answer to God.

Forgiveness is not a violation of justice. God never will compromise His justice.

Forgiveness is not merely the avoidance of conflict. There are a lot of us who do not like conflict. We don't want to share hard feelings or harsh words with someone else, so we tiptoe around issues of conflict. Sometimes forbearance is the right thing to do, but avoiding conflict is not the same as forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not calling something that someone else did that was immoral or destructive, OK. It is not turning a blind eye toward injustice.

Okay, then, what really is the meaning of *forgiveness*? This is what I read: a single word: the biblical word, *release*.

Let's, for a moment, not make it any more complicated than that—release. Forgiveness is a choice. To forgive means to choose to take someone whom you have been holding in your debt, holding in resentment and bitterness, and release him or her.

Forgiveness simply means you choose to release somebody from personal obligation to you—even though that person will eventually have to face the justice of God.

We heard, in today's Gospel lesson about the parable of the King and his servants as told in Matthew 18. After hearing how, when his debt was forgiven, the King's servant had treated his OWN debtors, Jesus ended the parable by saying, "the king rescinded his forgiveness." And then his closing words were these: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Forgiveness is release. As we are released by God, we are able to release other people in our lives. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

Forgiveness is a decision and a process. We can release someone from obligation to us personally, although the smoldering embers of resentment may keep burning in us for some time to come, and that's okay.

Forgiveness is hard. It's work. Forgiveness is not for the fainthearted. Forgiveness is the act of admitting that we are like other people.

So here is our challenge, found in Colossians 3:13 "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Okay...but how do we do that?

The first step is always the hardest. We have to be willing to forgive. In Micah 7: 18, we hear about why God forgives: "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives transgression? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy." God delights in showing mercy. Do we?

If we really have forgiven, we will feel released, as well. Now that may take time, but the decision to forgive will start us on the right path.

In Luke 6:35, Jesus tells us his criteria for how we are to live:

Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

The widow of the man who shot the children in the one-room Amish school wrote a letter to the Amish community. It is a powerful letter, one you wouldn't expect. One paragraph that she wrote says this:

"Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe...Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you."

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Forgiveness is not just what the world needs; forgiveness is what changes the world. AMEN