***“Too Great a Burden”*** by Stephen Finlan at The First Church, 3-6-19, Ash Wednesday

**Matthew 6**

2 Whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. . . . 7Do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
10Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
11-12 Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. 13 And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from evil.

14For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; 15but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

In Lent we will be reflecting upon Jesus’ last week in the flesh, so it has some sadness in it. But Lent also asks us to be serious about our own spiritual walk, and that’s what we see in the wonderful lectionary reading for today.

Here in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asks us to seek and to do God’s will, but not to make a big show of our good deeds, nor to trumpet our prayers and make a big production of them. But we certainly can pray, sincerely and simply, as shown in the Lord’s Prayer. There seem to be four main points to in the prayer. First there is praying for God’s will, which means that we seek to *harmonize* with God’s will. It makes no sense to pray for it if we are secretly going to work against it, or shut our minds to God’s way. So this first, and possibly most important, part of the prayer expresses our active *quest* for goodness and truth, and our pledge to act in accordance with the goodness and truth we discover. The second main point is the down-to-earth prayer for our daily bread, for our survival. This tells me that it is alright to have a certain amount of sensible self-interest in our prayers. That is not the same as being egotistical.

The third point is the request to be forgiven, linked with a promise to forgive others. Forgiving others releases us from the burden of resentment. People who don’t forgive, who nurse their resentment and carry it around, become embittered and miserable. Martin Luther King said hatred is too great a burden to carry. This is not to say that forgiveness is easy. In fact, it can so difficult that we really should not *force* ourselves to forgive if we are not ready. You can ask God to help you to *become* ready to forgive. But you can also pray for strategies that affirm your self-worth and dignity.

The fourth point is well expressed in this translation, where it says “do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from evil” (6:13). In other words, help us not to *have* to go through difficult trials. When this passage is translated “lead us not into temptation,” it can be misunderstood, implying that God might do such a thing, which is not what is meant. The saying is surrounded by teachings on forgiveness, and it is *part of* that teaching. Jesus is saying that if we fail to forgive, if we cling to resentment, we are going to bring ourselves into a time of trial. We attract negative energy to ourselves if we *Nurture* negativity, such as anger.

This does not mean that we are to blame for every painful experience that comes our way—by no means! Sometimes we get slammed by things in life, and it is not our fault. But we will certainly bring trying experiences upon our head if we are constantly angry.

Now, to summarize the main points: Don’t brag about your good deeds. *God* knows what you are doing, and that is enough. —Don’t show off while praying. God hears the real prayer of your heart, and *that* is enough. —Pray for God’s kingdom, God’s way, and God’s will to prevail on earth, as it does in heaven. —Forgive others, so that you may be forgiven. Don’t cling to resentment and anger, or you will bring yourself into a time of trial. —And remember that God forgives you and wants you to *feel* forgiven. I need to stress that: God wants you to feel loved and forgiven.