

Sermon Series Lord, Teach Us to Pray Week 4 August 6, 2017
“Keep Us Forgiven With You, and Forgiving Others”

Our Father who is in heaven, uphold the holiness of Your name. Bring in Your kingdom so that Your will is done on earth as it's done in heaven. Give us the bread we need for today. Forgive us for the ways we have wronged You, just as we also forgive those who have wronged us. And don't lead us into temptation, but rescue us from the evil one.

This is the fourth week of a five-week sermon series on the Lord's Prayer ~ this prayer that Christians and 12-step groups pray so often that it rolls off our tongues like a grocery list. This is the only prayer we know that Jesus taught, and because we've learned it in King James language it's important that we hear it in other ways... in language we speak. It's because Jesus taught this prayer as a template for all prayer, that it's so important for us to unpack it, to listen to it, to understand it. The disciples said to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray” and Jesus gave them this model for prayer that we still use, we still pray what He taught.

In this prayer, there's an order and pattern to follow. It's addressed to the One whom Jesus called “Abba” or “Papa.” The Lord's Prayer isn't prayed to some far-off deity, some clock-maker-God who set the world in motion and left it on its own; it's an intimate prayer addressed to “Abba-Papa”. This can sound like a foreign language for us who learned the King James formal address: Our Father. Whatever name - Father, Abba, Papa - this prayer begins with our confidence that God is leaning in to hear us. And so we praise God, “Holy is Your name!” recognizing that we are in God's presence... that we are mere children, we are acknowledging the wonder, and greatness of God, acknowledging God's awesomeness.

And then Jesus has taught us to ask for the moon. The first request in this prayer is to ask - to yearn as God surely yearns with us - for the world to be made right. This is a yearning for justice, for peace, for love, for home, for safety, for belonging, for all the human family, for all the thing that God wills for us... for God's Kingdom to come here on earth. So we pray as Jesus taught: Abba, Papa-God, we have a bold, outrageous request of You: make the world right! Make the world as You intended it to be!

Next Jesus prayed, "Give us the bread we need for today." This is a prayer that remembers our spiritual ancestors, the Israelites, who were given manna from heaven, only enough for each day. This was a test from God, to see how well the Israelites trusted God to provide, each day, what they needed to survive. "Give us the bread we need for today." It's a request to be mindful of how little we do need; an opportunity to notice all that God provides for us. This is a prayer that remembers that those who have enough bread for today, are to share with those who don't have enough. "Give us all, Lord, all the human family, the bread we need for today."

The disciples said to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray", and they were probably sorry they'd asked when He prayed, "Forgive us our trespasses **as we forgive** those who trespass against us." Trespass is a word I associate with staying off lawns and out of rundown buildings, but centuries ago to "trespass" was to commit an offense against someone. Some translations use the word debts: "Forgive us our debts" (forgive what we owe.) And some translations use the word that makes the most sense to me: sin. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

What does it mean to forgive? It's so much more than that snarky word our mothers forced us to say to our siblings, "Saar-ree!" (At least that's how I said it.) To

forgive means to break down walls, to restore relationships, to begin again. Jesus used the word “repent” which means to turn around. When we ask forgiveness, we need to repent, to turn around and away from hurtful, offensive, sinful behavior. Abba, Papa-God, forgive our trespasses, our offenses, our sins... as we forgive those who sin against us. Or as we prayed earlier, “Keep us forgiven with You and forgiving others.”

Is the relationship you have with God what you want it to be? If it isn't then you might need to tear down the wall between you, to restore a loving and intimate personal relationship with God, like Jesus had with His Abba. Sin is whatever gets in the way, whatever prevents you from a full relationship with God. Whatever we say, or think, or do, that leads us away from God, rather than to God, is sin. To ask for forgiveness is to acknowledge to God that there are attitudes and behaviors in your life that need to be changed because they're causing a barrier between you and God... because they're hurting someone else... because they're hurting you.

I mentioned last week that I wrote an article in the *United Methodist Interpreter Magazine* about the camp I codirect. In that article, I said that we're all broken, and that at a Christian camp we can find acceptance, and healing, and community. Someone from camp reacted strongly to that word “broken.” If you don't see yourself as broken, as a sinner, as less than who God created you to be... then you have no use for a Savior... perhaps no use for a real relationship with Jesus Christ, who came to redeem, to save, to heal us from our brokenness, from our sin.

To pray, “forgive us our sins” is to ask God to break down the wall your sin, your brokenness, and self-centeredness have created. It's to lay down your pride ask Abba-God to embrace you with open arms, and to say, “It's okay. I forgive you. I love you.” In

our analytical culture, and for those of us who are extremely self-critical, it's vital to us to have someone else - a fellow human being - speak words of God's love and forgiveness to us. Meister Eckhart, the 13th century theologian, said, "If the only prayer you ever pray is 'thank You' it is enough." I would paraphrase Meister Eckhart and say, "If the only reason you ever come to church is to be reminded that God loves and forgives you... it is enough."

We have to see ourselves as broken, as sinners, as less-than-we-were-created-to-be, in order to ask for God's forgiveness. And then to ask and receive forgiveness demands that we repent, that we change our behavior. Jesus added condition, a restriction, to God's forgiveness. He added a fierce, frightening condition in the word "as." Abba-God, forgive us our sins **as** we forgive those who sin against us." For God to forgive you, you must forgive others.

A few years ago I preached a sermon about forgiveness using Dr. Fred Luskin's book, *Forgive for Good*. Dr. Luskin is the director of the Forgiveness Project at Stanford University, and an authority on forgiveness. He preached at Palo Alto First United Methodist Church when I was an associate pastor there, and it was fascinating to hear him talk to the church (he said to the congregation, sort of tongue in cheek, this really is your field of expertise) about forgiveness. If you haven't read *Forgive for Good* come borrow it from my library. It's an excellent book, full of scientific reasons why, and practical advice on how, to forgive.

But the thing is Jesus didn't say that forgiveness is a good and healthy thing to do. He said that we are to forgive because we are forgiven. We are broken and sinful, deliberately hurtful and offensive, to God and to others. And God, out of God's love for

us – a love that you and I can only imagine, can only wonder at, can only accept as a free gift – out of God’s love for us, God forgives us. Again. And again. And again. All we have to do is ask, to be mindful of what we’ve done, and to repent and accept God’s forgiveness. If you wallow in guilt and regret and self-recrimination, you haven’t accepted God’s forgiveness. Accepting God’s forgiveness is (with the gift of holy-imagination) seeing God blow your sin away like a child blows on a dandelion puff. Forgiveness means that you and God let it go.

I said once (probably more than once) that my friend Donna said, “If I’d known the spiritual life was so hard I’d never have started it!” Following Jesus is hard. It’s His love, and His understanding of our humanness, and His mercy, that makes following Him bearable. There’s nothing simple about being a Christian. Some people in the crowds who followed Jesus, and listened to Him, turned away because it was hard. Because Jesus demanded a change of heart and life. Because there are conditions, like forgiving others because God forgives us. We are forgiven **as** we forgive others. We are reconciled and restored to a full relationship to God **as** we are reconciled and restored to others. This is hard stuff. Thank You God, that we have a Savior who loves and forgives us when we fall down! Thank You God, that we have brothers and sisters in Christ who love and forgive us when we fall down!

Forgiveness is hard. Forgiveness is a graduate class. Forgiveness is a spiritual practice, and takes spiritual muscles, and community support and encouragement. Last week I said that developing spiritual muscles gives us strength to follow Jesus. Being still in God’s presence, looking for Jesus in the world, reading the bible, worshipping, and caring for the physical and spiritual needs of others - especially the most vulnerable

among us - these are foundational spiritual practices. Asking and accepting God's forgiveness builds on these spiritual practices. If we mindlessly pray "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" without naming our sin, our offenses, our brokenness... without waiting to be assured that God does forgive us... that's not a spiritual practice. It's mouthing words. It's the equivalent of saying to God, "Let's do lunch sometime."

We learn to ask for and accept God's forgiveness when we look deeply and truly at who we are, when we spend time with God, when we tend our relationship with God, when we have spiritual practices, when we use and strengthen our spiritual muscles. Then asking for and accepting God's forgiveness is meaningful, and restorative, and then... we are able to do the **harder** work of forgiving others. There doesn't seem to be a magic formula for doing that. Simply that we recognize that we forgive **because** we are forgiven. We are forgiven **as** we forgive.

Jesus sat at a table, and shared His last meal, with the man who betrayed Him. Actually Jesus sat at a table, and broke bread, and poured wine, with a lot of people who betrayed Him, because when He was arrested and tried, His disciples ran away. They all betrayed Him, they all deserted Him. And yet on the cross Jesus prayed, "Abba, Father, forgiven them." Jesus has modeled for us what it is to forgive. And when we follow Him, we learn from Him ~ what it is to ask, and to receive, and to offer forgiveness, in His name.

This is such a broken and hurting world. I wonder if we practice forgiveness - ask for and accept God's forgiveness, and offer forgiveness to others - it would help heal the world, and help reveal God's Kingdom... come on earth as it is in heaven. "Forgive us

our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” In this new week, strengthen your spiritual muscles: practice forgiveness. And look for God’s Kingdom to be revealed.

Amen.