

February 3, 2008
Psalm 32, Matthew 18:21-35
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Life's Unfinished Business
(Third in a series on the Lord's Prayer)

A friend and fellow seminarian began his ministry in a small church in Tidewater Virginia. Near the church were three homes in which three couples in their sixties lived. In each house, at least one member of the couple had been an elder in the church. When my friend arrived as the new pastor, only one of the three couples still belonged to the church. Four years before, two of the couples had gotten their noses out of joint over some issue at Session. In anger, they had left the church. The couples had not spoken to each other since the incident.

Just before my friend came on the scene, a retired minister who was serving the church preached a sermon on forgiveness. In a daring moment, the preacher stopped the service and enlisted the entire congregation in leaving the sanctuary in order to visit the two alienated families. The estranged members received their surprise visitors politely, but stood by their decision not to return. My friend said that by the time he got to the church, the failed efforts of the congregation to bring about forgiveness and reconciliation had broken their spirit. He wrote that it "caused everyone, including this wet behind the ears pastor, to walk around ... on egg shells." (*Living by the Word*, William Hawkins, The Christian Century).

When we, as members of Christ's body, do not practice forgiveness and mutual forbearance, we are missing the very thing that makes the church the church. The church lives by the forgiveness of sins. We stand before God as forgiven sinners. As God in Christ has forgiven us, we also ought to forgive one another. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus prays, "Forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven the debts of others." In his words of explanation on this petition of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus said, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Mt. 6:14).

Jesus has forever linked together these two dimensions of forgiveness. The words of Jesus make it sound as if God's forgiveness is conditional. God's forgiveness is unconditional because it flows from God's free, unmerited grace. In the cross of Christ, God has taken away our sin. We cannot earn it. We simply receive it in grateful faith. It is not so much that God's forgiveness is conditional upon our forgiveness of others; rather, God's forgiveness is robbed of its power and effectiveness when we do not forgive others. How can we know the power of God's forgiving love if we do not know what it is to forgive others? If we do not forgive others, we have no room in the chambers of our small hearts to receive the gift of our forgiveness from God. Only as we forgive others can we know what it is to be forgiven. How can we claim to possess what we refuse to give? The experience of being forgiven makes us want to forgive others. Karl Barth has written, "The hope one entertains for oneself necessarily opens the heart, the feeling, and the judgment in respect to others." (*Prayer*, p.67) As we forgive others, we experience again and again the power of God's forgiveness in our lives.

Certainly, the words of Jesus on forgiveness stand behind the story we read from Matthew's gospel. Peter has been around Jesus long enough to know that Jesus is something of a radical when it comes to the notion of grace. In the Jewish tradition of his day, a person is expected to forgive someone three times. When Peter asks Jesus how many times we are to forgive someone who has hurt us, he goes way beyond the Jewish tradition in suggesting the number seven. Peter doubles the number and adds one more for good measure. He, too, wants to err on the side of grace. Surely seven times is enough. Jesus messes up the arithmetic of forgiveness by saying seventy times seven, a number that makes it impossible to keep score. I can keep account of three. I can even manage seven. But I don't have four hundred and ninety fingers and toes. Forgiveness is not about numbers. Forgiveness is about gratitude and grace.

Jesus tells a story that compares the ways of God to a king who wants to settle his accounts. One servant owes the king an amount that is almost fifteen times greater than the annual income of King Herod. In fact, Jesus uses the figure of ten

thousand talents to convey the idea of the greatest debt imaginable. There is no way this man, or any person, could pay such a debt. When the servant begs for mercy, the king sets him free and forgives the debt. When this first servant comes upon a fellow servant who owes him a pittance, the servant demands payment in full. The one who had been set free, imprisons his fellow servant. The one who had been forgiven his enormous debt demands full payment of his neighbor's small debt. When word of all that has taken place reaches the King, he is angry. The king summons the first servant back for a new judgment. The king says, "I forgave you all that debt. You should have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you."

Jesus says that we cannot expect God's mercy for ourselves and refuse to give it to others. God is perfectly capable of dealing with each one of us on the basis of what we deserve, if we so chose to deal with others. We cannot pray for forgiveness and expect to receive it when we do not offer such forgiveness to others. To confess our sins in worship while nursing a grudge against another or plotting a way to get back at another is to make a mockery of faith.

Perhaps there is no more difficult task and no more satisfying task in life than forgiving the people who have wounded us. Forgiveness is life's unfinished business. We nurse old wounds; we hold grudges; we let our hurt and disappointments make us bitter, fearful, emotionally closed and small minded. Hatred is like a cancer that silently eats away at us until we shrivel up and die emotionally and spiritually. Bitterness diminishes us; forgiveness enlarges us. Practicing the grace of forgiveness is essential for our spiritual growth. To refuse to forgive is to admit our spiritual weakness. To forgive is to discover great spiritual strength.

It is hard enough to forgive when someone admits that he or she has injured us. It seems almost impossible to forgive when a person acts as if nothing is wrong or refuses to acknowledge the hurt. In those moments we hold before us the words Jesus spoke from the cross as the soldiers reviled him and threw dice for his clothes: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." In every act of forgiveness, there is a crucifixion. The one who is crucified is the one who forgives. Yet, there is no other path to resurrected life than through the hard work of forgiveness.

The Lord's Prayer holds together these two dimensions of forgiveness – God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others. I have shared with some of you that Dr. Donald Shriver, the former President of Union Theological Seminary in New York, wrote in a book on the Lord's Prayer that forgiving is not the same thing as forgetting. In fact, forgiving is not forgetting at all. It is a special way of remembering. When we are deeply hurt, there is always a scar to remind us of the hurt. We bear the scar, but we let go of the anger and the desire to get even. The scar is there to remind us of what has happened, but the wound is healed through the salve of divine love.

Jesus said that we are to forgive "from the heart." The events of 9/11 brought the issue of forgiveness before the national conscience. On the morning of the anniversary of her husband's death, the wife of the pilot of Flight 93 that crashed into the Pennsylvania countryside on 9/11 said, "Life is short. There is no time to hate." When we allow hatred to consume our hearts, the enemy wins. As individuals and as a people we still have spiritual work to do.

In her book, *Stolen Lives: Twenty Years in a Desert Jail*, Malika Oufkir tells the wrenching story of her family's twenty year imprisonment in Morocco. Malika was the daughter of General Oufkir, a close aide and confidant of the King of Morocco. Malika had been adopted by the King, lived in the palace and was treated like a royal princess. In 1972, her father was executed for attempting a coup. Nineteen year old Malika, her mother and her five siblings were thrown into prison. Her younger siblings grew up in the emotional, physical and spiritual deprivations of prison life. They knew hunger, sickness, despair and mental and physical anguish. For ten years they were in solitary confinement. After fifteen years, the children managed to escape through a tunnel they had dug, only to be captured again after five days. By then international attention was focused on the plight of the children. They spent the last five years under house arrest before they were pardoned by the King. Even after their release, they bore the scars of twenty years of mistreatment and abuse. Malika and her family had much to forgive. Malika wrote:

"In prison, hatred helped me to survive. The hatred I felt for the King became mixed up with what I thought I

felt for my country. On my release, I rejected both.

“Now I swing between the deepest resentment and the sincere wish to feel no more hatred. Hatred will never enable me to make up for the lost years. Not me, not my mother, not my brother and sisters. But I’ve still got some way to go.

“I rediscovered my peace of mind and my love for Morocco in the desert. I have traveled back and forth across it... The desert soothed me. It reconciled me with my past, and helped me understand that I am just passing through. In the desert, there is no need for pretence, I am truly myself. Nothing matters except the eternal.”
(p. 208)

I wonder what it would be for us, who struggle to find the path to forgiveness, to substitute the word “God” for the word “desert.”

“I have rediscovered my peace of mind... in God. I have traveled back and forth... God soothed me. God reconciled me with my past, and helped me understand that I am just passing through. In God, there is no need for pretence; I am truly myself. Nothing matters except the eternal.”

Only God, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, can lead us into the experience of forgiveness – of being forgiven and of forgiving others.

Could this be our life’s unfinished business?