

On Forgiveness

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Luke 11:1-13

11 He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' ² He said to them, 'When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

⁵ And he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." ⁷ And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

⁹ 'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

Sermon

Imagine asking for forgiveness fifty years after you've done something terrible.

Imagine being asked for forgiveness fifty years after someone has done something terrible to you.

The late civil rights leader and Congressman John Lewis told it this way:

“I was beaten up, bloodied, and bruised after the Freedom Ride to Rock Hill, South Carolina in 1961. Some fifty years later, I was contacted by Elwin Wilson, a former member of the Ku Klux Klan. He was one of our assailants, and he...came to Washington, DC with his son to apologize in person... ‘I am sorry about what I did that day. Will you forgive me?’ I accepted his apology. We hugged and cried together. He had grown to see what was decent and right.”¹

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We’ve been walking through the Lord’s Prayer and here we are at the forgiveness portion of Jesus’ Abba prayer:

As Matthew puts it:

forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And as Luke words it:

forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

What did Jesus mean when he asked us to pray for forgiveness?

This line of the Lord’s Prayer invites us to whole a lot of different ideas together, but before I dive into this array of ideas, let me give you the headlines of my interpretation of Christian forgiveness. When we forgive, we take ourselves out of a cycle of harm. When we seek forgiveness, we accept responsibility and commit to change - we commit to the same interruption of a cycle of harm.

Breaking the cycle of harm through forgiveness happens individually interpersonally as well as culturally and systemically. I want to talk about each practice of forgiveness, from the debtor and the forgiver’s perspective.

¹ John Lewis. Carry On: Reflections for A New Generation. pp. 87ff.

When we pray Jesus' prayer and ask,
forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

This petition functions on an individual level - when I pray it, I should be asking with humility and honest examination: where have I, Reebee, harmed, fallen short, sinned against my family, my neighbor here and abroad, against creation, against my creator? These are not questions that we ask ourselves out of shame and guilt. Seeking forgiveness is a way of looking honestly at the past for the purpose of building the future God wants for us, as we relate to our kin and our world.

When we are in the position to forgive others, we ask, who has harmed me, who is indebted to me, and how can I break this cycle that we are in?

Now, let me not be misheard or misunderstood: the process of forgiveness should not open us to re-injury. Jesus gives us a process for forgiveness that involves a change in the harmful behavior:

“Be on your guard! If a sibling sins, you must rebuke the offender, *and if there is repentance*, you must forgive.” - Luke 17:3

I've learned from survivors of domestic abuse that forgiveness cannot not come when they are still in danger. The process of forgiveness cannot be rushed and cannot not begin until they first are safe. This is a matter of justice.

But here is an interesting thing about the process of forgiveness, from the forgiver's perspective. It can be an act that breaks a cycle of re-injury and harm. It can be an act of reclaiming one's own control and power. When we forgive, that person who has harmed us no longer has power over us. We are not re-injured by holding on.

John Lewis said of his attacker: “I didn't need him to apologize to forgive him. Because I had long ago decided that I wasn't going to be bound by the mental shackles of hate, anger, and discontent. Forgiveness is medicine for the mind, balm for the body, and healing for the heart.”²

When we pray Jesus' prayer and ask,
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for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

² Lewis, p. 88.

This petition functions culturally and systemically, also. This prayer is always prayed by *us*. Lord, how have our communal actions harmed others? *We* accept that the world does not yet resemble God's kingdom - and if we are to be what Steve last week called Kingdomist people, we admit our part in that shortcoming and we work for repair.

Historically, When Jesus spoke of forgiving debt, in a corporate sense, he was likely referring to debt slavery. Remember last week, Steve gave us historic context and talked about the four different ways that groups of Jews responded to the oppression of the Roman empire. Steve highlighted that Jesus presented a fifth way, a way that was true to ancient Jewish tradition, and essentially liberating for his people. In regard to debt, recall that the Romans taxed and taxed and taxed people into poverty and debt slavery. Ancient Judaism did not believe in unending debt - the concept of jubilee existed for both land and people, among other debt-limiting practices. So Jesus, in the face of Roman economic oppression said, our economic practices are not empire's. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. It was a tangible way to live differently from Rome. Give us our daily bread turned immediately to forgiveness for debt so we can survive tomorrow.³ Forgiving debt was a way of breaking a cycle of ongoing harm.

As we pray together, as a community, for forgiveness, it's not about shame. It's about breaking a cycle of harm. Seeking forgiveness is a way of looking honestly at the past for the purpose of building the future God wants for us, as we relate to our kin and our world.

I participated in a UCC racial justice training this week, and we talked a lot about the systemic racism in our history - from the origins of the concept of race, which was literally invented to justify enslavement of folks from Africa, to moments much more recent where systemic racism continues to cause deep harm. We see once again that we are not living in the kingdom that Jesus preached.

Charleston, El Paso, Atlanta, Buffalo: places where God's beloved children have been slaughtered because of their race. It keeps happening. And these are just the extreme examples - racism and white supremacy have - once again - become commonplace and their markers commonplace in our public discourse. We have to ask ourselves what part we play in this system, what privilege this system has given some of us, and what harm this system has done to others. Some folks find that honest examination uncomfortable. Don't make me or my kids feel guilty is literally turning into laws that keep students from learning about our shared history. When we don't know our history, we don't know our present, and we cannot be repairers of the breach.⁴

Let me share a quote from this week by Kelly Brown Douglas, dean of Episcopal Divinity School at Union - and I commend her whole reflection, which will be linked to in my manuscript: "The desire to maintain white innocence and safeguard white children's comfort is a

³ John Dominic Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer*. pp143-160.

⁴ Isaiah 58:12

way of safeguarding white privilege. Not talking about white privilege is the soil in which white supremacy festers.”⁵

When we pray together, as a community, for forgiveness, it’s not about shame. Seeking forgiveness is a way of looking honestly at the past and the present for the purpose of building the future God wants. It’s part of being “Kingdomist” people.

John Lewis also wrote on societal forgiveness and repentance: “I hope that forgiveness can become a greater part of our national character... Where is forgiveness and mercy in the public arena? If we formed policy based on mercy, we would have a stronger and more equal justice system and a more equitable economy. For example, the House... passed a resolution that apologized for slavery [in 2008]. We should also pass resolutions that state our apologies for the death and wars we’ve created.”⁶

Forgiveness needs to be partnered with atonement and commitment to a new way of being. Some of the most lifegiving examples of forgiveness and start with humble truth telling, move through atonement, and then move to forgiveness and reconciliation.

I want to close with an invitation for prayer. I invite you to take a moment with these questions:

What is the cycle of harm you want to break?

Where can we offer forgiveness?

Where do we need forgiveness?

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<https://religionnews.com/2022/05/17/buffalo-racism-the-conversation-white-parents-should-be-having-with-their-children/>

⁶ Lewis, 89.