**Meditation 8/14/2022**

In 1946, as I was entering 5th grade, my mother, father and I moved to Charleston, SC. The ensuing years in Charleston were, as you would expect, critical in helping me to become the person I am today, and I often reflect on my experiences during that period.

When I was considering what I might share with you today, I thought back to the series of sermons on the Lord’s Prayer which Pastor Reebee gave earlier this year. This triggered a memory of the ritual with which we began every day while I was in public school in Charleston. First a student would read a passage from the Book of Psalms; then the class would recite the Lord’s Prayer, followed by the Pledge of Allegance.

The prayer which we use in Pilgrim Church is almost the same as the prayer we recited every day in school. In Charleston I learned to ask, “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,” but I became aware that some prayed for forgiveness of debts (as we do at Pilgrim) while others ask forgiveness of sins.

Trespasses, debts and sins: these appear to be three very different concepts but - as today’s scripture readings demonstrate - all three are used in our nation’s foundational Bible, the King James translation. Some might suggest we should back to the original source documents to determine rhe most faithful translation. But as today’s scripture readings illustrate, Luke and Matthew disagree on exactly what Jesus said as well as when and where he taught the prayer. The King James scriptures also provide support for each of the choices. According to Luke, we should ask God to forgive our sins and we should forgive those who are indebted to us. Matthew refers to “debts” and “debtors” in the prayer text but then switches to “trespasses” in the subsequent explanation of God’s intent.

I suggest that finding the purest translation of the original text is not the important issue. Instead, we might consider how our understanding of and response to this prayer is affected by the ordinary meanings of the words. With respect to many common forms of malfeasance this may not be an issue. Burglary, for example, clearly involves trespassing, creates a debt and is a sin – no problem! But the choice among sin, debt and trespass may well influence how we view other things we do.

When I was in college, from time to time I would take on a male role at a drama production at a nearby private girls’ high school. This also entailed, on occasion, dancing with some of the girls at social functions. At one such event I found myself dancing for a while with a girl who clearly had a weight problem. Although she pressed her body against me, she was perspiring noticeably; I was gracious, but not enthralled by the experience.

One evening, a few months later, I was passing time with friends in their dorm when their phone rang. The call was for me and, to my surprise, the caller was that overweight young lady. She asked whether I might be her escort an a major prom at her school. I responded with the untruthful statement that, regrettably, I had another commitment that evening, and thanked her for thinking of me.

For years now, I have regretted that snap decision. I realized that being escorted to the prom must have been terribly important to her. I scarcely knew her, but she had found the number for the phone in my dorm room and learned from my roommate where to reach me. She was in pain, but brave enough to, in effect, call for help from me. And I had blown her away. Helping her would have cost me nothing more than a little time and I likely would have been rewarded with an excellent dinner at her home.

The Good Samaritan story comes to mine. In several respects my behavior was arguably more reprehensible than the actions of the priest and Levite who passed by the injured man. The victim by the road was in physical pain; the girl I turned away was in emotional pain – and emotional pain can be much more severe than physical pain. There is no indication in scripture that the injured man had called out for help; I had been sought out and asked for help, but chose to not respond. The Samaritan voluntarily spent his money and time to help the victim; I had been unwilling to spend a few hours of my spare time.

In thinking about this event it seems clear to me that I have wilfully failed to help my neighbor. I have difficulty applying the contemporary words “debt” or “trespass” to this failure, but the word “sin” seems to fit perfectly.

I tell this story because I know that I have, more than once, told a similar “white lie” to avoid providing help to another – and, perhaps, not given further thought to the event. And I feel certain that I can without difficulty think of other types of day-to-day actions I have taken but which, when (and if) reconsidered fail to uphold the teachings of our scripture.

For this reason, when we raise the Lord’s prayer together I join you in saying the words “debts” and “debtors” but in my heart I think about “sins” and “sinners”. This difference in words helps remind me to consider all my “little” day-to-day sins, which otherwise I could easily ignore.