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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
July 21, 2013
Matthew 6: 9-13
Matthew 18: 21-35

4th in a Series on the Lord's Prayer
"Forgive Us Our Debts As We Forgive Our Debtors"

After decades of apartheid, Desmond Tutu said, "There is no future without forgiveness." Rather than choosing to retaliate against their oppressors, Tutu counseled people to forgive them. There is no future without forgiveness, he said.

In the news this past week we have seen anger displayed over the decision to put the Boston marathon bomber's picture on the cover of Rolling Stone Magazine, and we've seen people take to the streets in anger over the acquittal of George Zimmerman. We have heard people speak of wanting retribution and saying justice has been denied. We have not heard anything about forgiveness. Perhaps some people would say it is too soon in both cases for forgiveness to be offered. But if Tutu is correct, there is no future without forgiveness.

Jesus tells us to forgive those who have wronged us 77 times. When his teaching is held up against the light of today's news, it's apparent just how difficult it is to forgive someone . . .no matter whose side you fall on.

Forgiving is not an easy thing to do. And yet this phrase rolls so easily off our tongues every Sunday. "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." But everything in us resists the notion of forgiving. We simply don't want to do it because it feels so good to be angry. It feels so right to resent, and to hold a grudge and to wait for payback time. Frederick Buechner once said that we love the taste of anger at someone who has wronged us: we roll it around in our mouths as long as possible, savoring every last drop. Forgiveness is not a character trait that comes easily to most people.

Apparently it didn't come easily to Peter either, because in today's reading Peter basically says to Jesus, "Now wait a minute. You mean to tell me that when someone has done me wrong I'm supposed to forgive them as much as 7 times?" You gotta love Peter; he's honest and forthright about the difficulties he has following Jesus. But he's also being quite generous, because the religious tradition said you only had to forgive people three times. Peter figures 7 is generous but then on number 8, he can let 'em have it. "No," Jesus said. "77 times." Which is really another way of saying, "Stop counting."

He then proceeds to tell Peter a parable about a king who forgave his servant a very large debt, but when the servant had the opportunity to forgive someone else's debt, he demanded repayment. The king, upon hearing of the servant's refusal to forgive, throws

the servant in jail until he can repay his debt which, given the amount he owes, means forever.

Unlike many of Jesus' parables, there's nothing in this story that is difficult to understand. It's perfectly clear that we are to forgive others just as God has forgiven us.

What's not so clear is what Jesus means by forgiveness. Because when we hear him say forgive others, we think that means that we are to forgive and forget.

But that sort of forgiveness minimizes what has happened to us, glosses over it, and pretends that what happened to us isn't really that bad. That sort of forgiveness also excuses behavior that is unjust and incomprehensible. That sort of forgiveness does not take seriously the reality of what has happened. But that notion of forgiveness is so commonplace, and so ingrained in us . . . that we can't get past it . . . and therefore, we have a hard time forgiving. Because we can't forget, we can't excuse, we can't condone when someone has done wrong, so we go through life unable to forgive and disbelieving when other people can.

Do you remember 7 years ago when a gunman walked into an Amish school in Pennsylvania and killed 5 innocent girls? Yes? Then you might remember what really shocked people wasn't the fact that something as heinous as that happened; what shocked people was the Amish's willingness to forgive the gunman. Sister Joan Chittister wrote, "It was not the violence that shocked us. It was the forgiveness that followed it for which we were not prepared."

We weren't prepared for it because in our minds, we can't separate forgiveness from pardon or reconciliation. We hear forgiveness, and we automatically jump to the conclusion that the person who forgives has released that offender from punishment or that the relationship between the one granting forgiveness and the offender is somehow alright now. But when Jesus talks about forgiveness it means refusing to allow the hurt and pain the offender has placed on us to define who we are and who we're going to be. Forgiving the offender means standing up to that person and saying "I will not be a victim. I will not let seeds of bitterness or hatred fester in me and take over my life. I will not let that happen, because you do not have that power over me."

Biblical forgiveness takes very seriously the unjust behavior of the offender. When Jesus says forgive others, Jesus isn't telling us to condone or excuse abusive behavior. Jesus isn't telling us to forget any of that stuff ever happened. Does anyone here really believe that Jesus wants us to forget about the Holocaust, slavery, ethnic cleansing, 9/11, the exploitation of children, mistreatment of women or minorities, or turn a blind eye to the bully? Jesus doesn't want us to forget, because forgetting doesn't take them seriously, and I think Jesus would take those things very seriously if he were around today. He did when he was alive.

But Jesus didn't let those things define him, either. And he doesn't want them to define us, because letting them define us will lead to a life of torture and imprisonment, just like it did for the servant in his parable.

Simon Wiesenthal, a survivor of Nazi Germany's concentration camps, wrote a classic study: *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. The title comes from the Wehrmacht custom of putting a sunflower on the graves of Nazi soldiers. There was a military cemetery beside his concentration camp, and the prisoners saw the sunflowers on Nazi graves every day.

One day Wiesenthal, a prisoner, was summoned to the bedside of a young S.S. trooper who was dying. The young man wished to die in peace and wanted to confess and be forgiven by a Jew. Wiesenthal was chosen. The soldier's name was Karl.

Raised a Catholic, he joined the Hitler Youth and the S.S. as soon as he was old enough. He participated in the horrors of Nazi persecution and genocide against the Jews. Wiesenthal was surprised and wary and uncomfortable as Karl went on to describe in terrible detail a ghastly incident in which he was involved: Jews crowded into a house—families with children—gasoline—hand grenades—machine guns. As he is dying, he can't get the picture out of his mind. He needs to confess and to be forgiven. Wiesenthal listens and thinks but finally cannot forgive—or refuse to forgive—so he stands up and silently walks away from the dying soldier and leaves the room.

The second part of the book is “What Would You Do?” Wiesenthal invited a group of religious, political, and moral leaders to contribute essays. On the twentieth anniversary of the book, it was republished with new contributors: the Dalai Lama, Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Martin Marty, Rabbi Harold Kushner. Fr. Hesburgh said that his instincts as a priest were to forgive. Some said they didn't know what they would have done. Many agreed that no one individual has the right to forgive this man his monstrous behavior. Some said no, no way, not ever.

Rabbi Kushner, who wrote the bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, wrote,

Forgiving happens inside us. It represents a letting go of the sense of grievance and, perhaps most importantly, letting go of the role of victim. For a Jew to forgive a Nazi would not mean, God forbid, saying to them: “What you did was understandable. I can understand what led you to do it and I do not hate you for it.” It would mean saying, “What you did was thoroughly despicable and puts you outside the category of decent human

beings. But I refuse to let your blind hatred define the shape and content of my Jewishness.”

Rabbi Kushner told about a woman in his synagogue, a single mother with three young children whose husband had abandoned them for a younger woman. “How can you tell me to forgive him?” she asked. Kushner responded, “I’m asking you to forgive because he doesn’t deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into an angry, bitter woman. I’d like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is physically, but you keep holding on to him. You’re not hurting him by holding onto that resentment, but you’re hurting yourself.”

Biblical forgiveness means releasing ourselves from the hold the offender has on us and not to allowing hatred to eat away at us. Forgiveness means not letting hatred and anger, bitterness and resentment define us. Jesus does not want those things to define us, because letting them define us will lead to a life of torture and imprisonment, just like it did for the servant in his parable. And Jesus doesn’t want that for us, not as individuals or as a nation. Jesus wants us to look forward to a future that is shaped by hope, possibilities, and the grace of God.

Lord, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

Amen.

Sources:

Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4

John Buchanan, “A Full and Faithful Life: Praying and Forgiving”, March 20, 2011