

Season after Pentecost - "Give Us Each Day Our Daily Bread"

September 4, 2016

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 103:1-5; Luke 11: 1-4

Let this written and spoken word lead us to the living, Word, Jesus Christ our Lord.

The minister's sermon topic was "Forgive Your Enemies," After the sermon, he asked how many were willing to forgive their enemies. About half held up their hands.

Not satisfied, he harangued the congregation for another twenty minutes and repeated his question. "Raise your hand if you are willing to forgive your enemies." This received a response of eighty percent. Still unsatisfied, he lectured for fifteen more minutes and repeated his question. All raised their hands except one elderly gentleman in the rear.

"Mr. Jones, are you not willing to forgive your enemies?" "I don't have any," he replied "Mr. Jones, that is very unusual. How old are you?" "One Hundred and one." "Mr. Jones, please come down in front and tell the congregation how a man can live to be one hundred and one and not have an enemy in the world."

The old man teetered down the aisle, slowly turned to face the congregation, smiled and said, "I outlived every one of them!"¹

We talk a great deal about forgiveness in church. It's usually about our need for forgiveness. In our confession and at the altar we acknowledge that we daily fall short of God's ways and will. Throughout worship we give thanks that we have been made right with God through Jesus, who enacted the grace and love of God for all. It often seems that when we talk about forgiveness in church it's really code for "THE FORGIVENESS" — with a capital "T" and a capital "F" — that is, our eternal standing in heaven before God at the end of our lives and end of all time, as promised at Baptism and claimed for us by Christ.

But when teaching us a model for our daily prayer, Jesus is not speaking of ultimates or endtimes. Jesus is talking about the everyday messiness of messing up. Not generic "sin" as the human condition but "sins" as the individual little and big ways we hurt others, defy God's good ways and deceive ourselves with a multitude of rationalizations. You may have noticed that when we have the rite of confession and forgiveness in worship, there is this note in italics before we read the confession. It usually says, "*Silence for reflection and self-examination.*" It is intended to be a time when we each run through the previous week, noticing particular wrongs we committed, things done or left undone, that caused pain for others and God. Not just a "I've been a bad girl or boy this week." But "Lord, I was unkind to my co-worker. She plucks every one of my nerves but that is no justification for my meanness." Or "I made no time for you, Lord. Not even a hello." Or "I've lied to my parents about where I went last weekend." Or "I lost my temper with my spouse

again.” What I’m trying to say is that we church folks have become so comfortable speaking about our sinful nature that we have stopped noticing, naming and repenting of our sins.

“Sin” seems to be a taboo word these days, maybe because it has most commonly and potently been used to inflict guilt. But that is not what Jesus is trying to do in this petition of his model for prayer. Jesus tells us to ask God’s forgiveness as part of our daily prayer, our daily time with God. Not in generalities but specifically as you examine the day. Why? Because those wrongs get in the way of our relationship with God and one another. If we don’t tend to them — or more correctly ask God to help us tend to them — then they will fester and multiply, causing even more hurt, creating even greater obstacles for our relationships and for God’s love and kingdom to come here on earth as it is in heaven. We bring our specific failings to God in daily prayer not to beat up on ourselves but to ask God to change us with the forgiveness and mercy God freely gives us. If you want to build up your legs for a marathon, you have to exercise. If you want to become a great cook, flyer, a saxophone player, an artist, you have to practice. If we want to become more of the person God created us to be, then we too have spiritual exercises that we practice so that God can shape, form and grow us. Within the practice of prayer, Jesus tells us to include the exercise of examining our actions and lifting them to God for healing, insight and advise. Not so we can get into heaven but so that we may become more like the holy, grateful children of God we are. That is what God’s forgiveness can foster and grow in us. Forgive us this wrong, “Our Father,” so that we may become more like you.

What is the rest of that petition Jesus taught us about? “Forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us?” Or as we will pray later, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” “I do not believe Jesus is teaching us that we must forgive before the Father will forgive us — that would make forgiveness a matter of our works” rather than God’s unconditional, unearned, undeserved grace.² Some might say, it means that “if we, who are sinful, can forgive others, then surely God, who is perfect, will forgive us. But there is also the notion that the true mark of one who has been forgiven by God is that he or she will forgive others” Our relationship with God, Jesus is teaching us, is inextricably linked with our relationship with others.³ The forgiveness God offers us works hand-in-hand with our forgiveness of others.

Can you conjure a memory of a time when you sincerely apologized to someone and you were given forgiveness? It might be difficult. We say “Sorry” and “That’s okay” so often that we may not remember a deeper moment when a wrong was honestly acknowledged and a door to healing was opened. That’s what the work of repentance and

forgiveness is all about, between us and God and us and others. When one seeks forgiveness or one offers forgiveness barriers begin to fall and pathways to new life open. Whether you are the one wronged or you are the one who did the wrong, there is a great burden being carried. There's the weight of guilt, resentment, self-righteousness, pain, bitterness, revenge, denial. Forgiveness — as we know from God's forgiveness — is about freeing people and being freed from such burdens.

That is what the Amish families knew when they visited the family of Charles Roberts, who had killed ten innocent Amish children in the 2006 school house shooting in Lancaster County. The grieving Amish community did not want to carry hatred and bitterness along with their sorrow. They were striving to practice what Jesus taught, "Forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." Later that week the Roberts' family was invited to the funeral of one of the Amish girls who had been killed. And Amish mourners outnumbered the non-Amish at Charles Roberts' funeral. The press and most people, Christian and non-Christian alike, were astounded, skeptical or appalled. That Amish community, which knew the mercy and love of God, did not want the Roberts' family to carry the burden of his guilt, so they gave the costly gift of forgiveness. And perhaps the mercy the Roberts' family received would then flow through their lives onto others.

Forgiveness among us humans is not easy. Whether the wrong was real or perceived, we all know people who are prisoners of the past, and old grudges, feuds, hurt and resentments. Each day in the news we read about individuals, ethnic groups or nations who are captives in the ongoing cycle of vengeance — an eye for an eye. We may know people who are stuck in guilt, unable or unwilling to receive forgiveness. Our Lord and teacher was oh so wise to teach us the life-giving importance of forgiveness. He taught it in many parables, in acts of forgiveness, in words like, "You who are without sin cast the first stone" and "Forgive them they do not know what they are doing." Jesus taught us to practice seeking God's transforming forgiveness in our daily lives and prayer. Jesus taught us to let the mercy we know from "Our Father" to flow onto others . . . and when we can't, to get out of the way of God's grace.

Open the Hymnal to page 94, the order for Confession and Forgiveness. *(Pause)* Can you think of one thing this past week for which you would want God's forgiveness? *(Pause)* And when we get to that time of reflection, tell God the specific sin for which you need forgiveness, from which you need to be unchained. And then open yourself to receive the renewing, transforming, liberating forgiveness of God. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Story included in Bill Versteeg's 2008 sermon, "The Blessing of Forgiving Others" www.pbv.thunder-bay.on.ca/NetSermons/Luke%206%2037-38%20Blessing%20of%20Forgiving.html

2. adapted from Bob Deffinbaugh's article, "Teach Us to Pray" June 24, 2004 as posted on <http://bible.org>

3. Steven J. Cole, "Lord Teach Us to Pray" June 12, 2013 as posted on <http://bible.org>