

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

I was called by one of the local funeral homes last week and asked to preside at a funeral for a family whose mother had just died. Apparently the woman had Scottish Presbyterian roots and they wanted to honour that even though no one in the family has been part of any community of faith for decades. I agreed to meet with members of the family Wednesday morning and we planned the service together. In the course of our conversation I suggested that we say the Lord's Prayer during the funeral and they agreed that was a good idea.

"What version of the Lord's Prayer are you most familiar with," I asked?

At first they seemed unsure of what I meant so I clarified, "debts, trespasses or sins?"

"Trespasses," they replied sounding relieved that it was no more complicated than that.

I discovered early on that I need to make this clarification any time I meet to plan services with people who are not members of our own congregation. Until I came to Knox I don't remember saying the Lord's Prayer using the *debts* and *debtors* phrase. I am most comfortable with the version in our Book of Praise #564 and #469 which use *forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*, but I remember that *trespasses* and *trespassers* was the preferred form in the church of my childhood.

How is it that we have these variants? Which one is "right"? Which one is "true"?

In the body of the prayer from Matthew's gospel which was read for us this morning, the Greek word translated *debts* and *debtors* has a wide range of meanings all grouped around one common understanding. It always denotes something which is owed – something due – a duty or obligation to give or to pay. It is debt in the broadest sense of the word: at its narrowest it is a money debt – at its widest, any moral or religious commitment which one must discharge.

Forgive us for every failure in duty, for failure to submit to God and to others that which we ought to have delivered, for the debt to God and others which we owe and which we have failed to pay.

In Luke, Chapter 11 we see, *forgive us our sins*. Luke uses a different word, a word for sin but not originally an ethical word. Its basic meaning is simply a missing of the mark – as in missing the mark when throwing a javelin or shooting an arrow. Sin is a failure to hit the mark – a failure to realize the true aim of life – a failure to do and be that which ought to have been, which could have been, done. So, although based on different pictures, these words are not radically different in meaning as their authors understand them.

Jesus gave the prayer to his disciples in Aramaic, not Greek, of course. In his time sin would have been understood almost exclusively as a failure in obedience to God: goodness was obedience – sin was disobedience. A person's first obligation was recognized as giving obedience to God and therefore not to give obedience to God would be considered being in

debt to God. Both Matthew and Luke need to translate the common Aramaic word for sin which literally means debt. Matthew chooses the exact Greek equivalent – debt, and Luke selects the common understanding of the word – sin.

Although we may see major differences between the words *debts* and *sins* – they are both a legitimate translation of the Aramaic used by Jesus. Both are right – both are true. It is our personal preference – our tradition and our history – which lead us to feel more comfortable with one or the other variant.

But what about *trespasses*?

This takes a bit more work to understand. Linguistically speaking you can't really justify the use of the word *trespass* to translate the Greek word in the text. Does that mean translations using this form did a careless and inaccurate job? Not exactly. If you look at verses 14 and 15 of Matthew 6 you see an extension of the petition, a commentary if you will, which reads: *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

The Greek word used here means a false step or a blunder and it can be translated as *trespasses*. What is assumed is that the translators who insert this word into the body of the prayer take it from these amplifying verses at the end because they want to avoid confusion with monetary debt. It isn't a technically "correct" translation but we can understand how it might have happened and we can accept that for many in our society – as was true for the grieving family I met on Wednesday – it is what they know.

Now that the wordsmithing is done and we can put aside arguments about whether we should be using *debts*, *sins*, or *trespasses* when saying this prayer, let's look more closely at meaning.

The Lord's Prayer has its focus in God's saving work. Only this petition has anything to do with the actions of the one who pray – asks God to forgive "*as we forgive those who sin against us.*" And this, together with the fact that the commentary following the prayer concerns this petition on forgiveness, is revealing.

If the Sermon on the Mount is a summary of Jesus' teaching, and the Lord's Prayer is at the heart of this sermon, then this petition for forgiveness is at the very epicenter of the gospel. Reconciliation is the point of Jesus' entire ministry. Thus, forgiveness is at the heart of our relationship with God, of faithfulness, and of life in Christian community. No better word can be found to describe the saving work of God or the day-to-day work of Christ in setting relationships right. Perhaps no other theme appears more often in Matthew's gospel than that of forgiveness.

Nearly one third of the occurrences in the New Testament of a word meaning forgiveness are in the gospel of Matthew – forty-nine times. There are few chapters without several references. One most directly related to the Lord's Prayer (and its brief commentary) is the parable we read today of the forgiving king who hands over the unforgiving servant to the torturers for full payment. It is a story of abundant grace and profound warning – the merciful master becomes, at the refusal of passed on forgiveness, the stern judge as we

hear the concluding words of Jesus: *"So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

Matthew gives extraordinary emphasis to how one's reconciliation with God is lived out by followers of Jesus. The readiness to forgive others is not optional for those who have been forgiven by God. "How can you be forgiven if you don't yourself forgive?" has often been categorized as a Jewish overstatement. But the connection between human and divine forgiveness is deeply ingrained into New Testament thought.

Forgive us as we forgive... is not a focus on asking God to forgive in the same way or to the same degree that we forgive. The prayer is not advocating a proportional kind of forgiveness. In this petition we acknowledge that we have no right to pray for forgiveness for our own sins if we cannot forgive those who have wronged us. It is really a prayer for release from what ever prevents us from moving into the hopeful future made possible by Jesus Christ. Forgiveness among humans is not the same as absolution – it is freedom from the past. When we do not forgive others their debt to us, we are in fact not free ourselves, for we remain attached to them. And as we hold them bound, so we remain bound.

Forgiveness often does not come easily – not when it comes to forgiving others or ourselves. We may berate ourselves endlessly for our failures, unable to forgive ourselves even after we have asked God to forgive us. But if we do not forgive others, we cannot experience God's forgiveness ourselves.

Some are reluctant to forgive because doing so seems to discount the seriousness of the wrongs that others do; actually, forgiving says the opposite. Forgiving requires first acknowledging that an act is wrong. If it were not, forgiveness would not be needed. When we forgive, we are saying, "What you did was wrong, but I release you from its penalty."

We also release ourselves when we forgive those who have harmed us. If we do not forgive, we remain bound to the one who has wronged us. Only by forgiving can we put the past behind us. Nursing hurts from the past takes energy, and forgiving frees us to use that energy to live fully and abundantly in the present. The good news is that the forgiveness we extend to ourselves and others does not well up from our own strength, but comes from our own experience of having been forgiven in the first place by God.

Forgiveness is God's answer to the all too predictable cycles of hostility, violence, and revenge. This petition thus becomes a prayer for an end to wars, feuds, and grudges. It calls for restorative justice and mediation as ways of resolving conflict and dispute in peaceable ways that promote renewal and restoration of persons to their communities. Jesus reminds us to make forgiving and being forgiven a matter of prayer. Forgiveness is the door to freedom – open your heart to forgiving and forgiveness in prayer – enter into the freedom of God's abundant grace. **Amen.**