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Bridge Street United Church
January 28, 2024
Rev. Dr. John H. Young
Readings: Philippians 4:4-9; Psalm 8; Luke 11:1-4

The Lord's Prayer, Part 2

Today's sermon is the second of two looking at the Lord's Prayer. As I did last week, I shall take a phrase of the Lord's Prayer at a time and offer comment on it before moving on to the next phrase. The particular wording each denomination uses has been shaped by the use of the Lord's Prayer in its worship services, or liturgies. And there are slight differences from one denomination to another. In this sermon, I shall use phrases from the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer as we have known it in the United Church.

“Give us this day our daily bread.” Or, as it is sometimes translated, “Give us today the bread we need for tomorrow.” So, what might we learn from this petition? For starters, this petition reminds us that we are dependent upon God and, frankly, upon others, for our daily bread. At its heart, the phrase, “Give us this day our daily bread” reminds us that none of us are self made or self-sufficient. No matter what our level of wealth, or lack thereof, we did not create the fertility of the land. We do not control the rain or the other weather conditions that lead to good crops, versus poor crops, and, sometimes, no crops. We did not get to choose the families of our birth or many of the circumstances of our lives. I know that if I had been born to a family living in a barrio of Rio de Janeiro, or to a black family in South Africa, my life would have been very different, very different, no matter how hard I might have worked. So, this clause is a reminder that much of our lives lies beyond our control.

Martin Luther, in his explication of the Lord's Prayer for his followers, made a related point. Praying for our daily bread, he wrote, is about more than praying for flour and the other constituent parts of bread. It is about needing fertile fields, farmers to raise crops, others to mill wheat, still others to bake. He makes the point also that having enough bread, having enough food more generally, depends on living in a peaceful land, with good stable government. While Luther and I would disagree about what a stable government looks like, his point here is apt and accurate. Praying for our daily bread involves more, means praying for more, than simply having enough money to stop by the Metro grocery store on North Front Street or the Cobs bread shop a little further north on that same street.

On a related point, it reminds us that what we have can also be easily lost, and through no fault of our own. Last fall I heard an interview with an Ukrainian man who had relocated with his family to Alberta, having left his relatively prosperous farm in a part of Ukraine now occupied by Russian forces. "It is all gone, destroyed," he remarked, talking about his farm. "I am here and safe, but I am starting again." The unadded piece was "I am starting again but with nothing and as a much older man in a foreign land." I share that story as a reminder that the things we have are transitory in ways that may not occur to us. Most of us in this worship service do not think much about the bread we need for today or tomorrow. Most of us here have enough money to feel some level of security, and in that sense this petition may not carry as much weight for us as it does for someone who does look today for the bread they need for today.

"Give us this day our daily bread." Finally, as I mentioned last week, note the word "our" here. Give us this day our daily bread; our daily bread, not my daily bread. There is a care here, or should be a care here, for others and not only for ourselves. Think of the story about Jesus feeding a multitude who had spent the day listening to his teachings, one of the rare stories from

Jesus' ministry found in all four gospels. Remember, he feeds the crowd with five barley loaves and two small fish. We can think about the miraculous element of the story. But I am struck by Jesus' concern for the crowd, a crowd his disciples urged him to send away because they could not feed such a group. But Jesus had compassion on them. He knew they needed food, as we need food. "Give us this day our daily bread."

"And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." This petition is the tough one. It is the part of the Lord's Prayer I have had people ask about most often over the years. It is the one I wrestled with when I first really sat down, in my early adult years, and thought about what I was praying when I prayed the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our trespasses," or "Forgive us our debts" as one other version of this prayer goes, or "Forgive us our sins," as most modern translations now read. But the challenge is not whether we use trespasses, or debts, or sins. The challenge is the second part of the petition, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who sin against us." The hard part here is: "But what if someone has done something to me, or even more likely done something to someone I love deeply, something I cannot forgive. Does that mean that God will not forgive me?" Is it a *quid pro quo*, a this for that?

I want to begin by saying that forgiving does not mean condoning. Forgiving someone who has hurt us does not mean that what that individual did to us, or to someone we love, was okay. It does not mean that at all. Sometimes the wrong that was done is easy to overlook, even if it was wrong, but even then our capacity to overlook the wrong does not make the action right. And sometimes the action is impossible to see as anything other than horrific, wrong. Forgiving is not condoning. What is wrong is wrong. But the question then becomes, "Will the wrong that

has been done to us control our lives?” When we forgive, we are reconciling ourselves with someone who has hurt us; we are not condoning the wrong done.

So, what does it mean when we pray, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us?” Does it mean a “this for that,” God holding back God’s forgiveness until we have first forgiven the person who wronged us? I don’t think so.

The Bible speaks with some frequency about God’s willingness to forgive, God’s desire to forgive us. I noted Martin Luther’s commentary on the Lord’s Prayer a little earlier. When Luther talks about this petition, he makes clear that God forgives us before we even know we need forgiveness. Luther, at least in my reading, equivocates a bit about how the second half of the petition then relates to that. So let me offer my thought about the relation of “as we forgive those who trespass against us.” I do not think that God withholds forgiveness until we first forgive another who has wronged us. I think God’s forgiveness is there for us. But for us to experience that forgiveness, we need to be able to forgive.

The hurt done to us that we cannot forgive, over time, can become something that grows inside us, the pain going deeper into our being with each passing day. It can take on a life of its own, and we may even begin to nurture it, so much a part of us it has become. That unforgiven thing can increasingly take over more and more of our life. And, I would argue, it can block us from receiving forgiveness, including the forgiveness God offers to us. I think the onus on us to forgive, in this petition of the Lord’s Prayer, is not because God will not forgive us if we do not, but because we will be unable to experience that forgiveness if we hold onto that hurt, that sometimes deep, consuming hurt. Only when we clear our decks by forgiving, not condoning but forgiving, only then can we experience that forgiveness God offers to us, a forgiveness that is there, waiting for us to receive it.

I want to tell you a story related to this point, a true story, and one some of you may remember. Forty years ago this winter, a thirteen year old girl, Candace Derksen, disappeared on her way home from school in Winnipeg. The case made headlines. Candace's body was found six weeks later, in a shack in Winnipeg, her hands and feet bound. Her mother Wilma recounts that on the day Candace's body was found, friends came to the house throughout the day. About 10:30 that night a stranger came to the door: "He told us, 'I'm the parent of a murdered child too.' . . . We invited him to the kitchen table and for the next two hours he told us in vivid detail everything he'd lost – his health, his relationships, his concentration, his ability to work. He'd even lost all memory of his daughter because now he could only think of the murder, the trauma and the hate that followed.

Cliff and I went to bed that night horrified by the graphic picture he'd painted. Having just been through the pain of losing our daughter, it now seemed we might lose everything else as well. And so we made a decision that night that we would respond differently, and we chose the path of forgiveness."¹ Wilma Derksen became a speaker on forgiveness and the importance of truth-telling. She has been clear. Forgiveness is not easy, and it looks different from time to time. But as she put it: "We knew that murder takes a life but we also knew – through the appearance of the bereaved father at our door – that the aftermath of murder can be just as deadly."² I share that story because it captures well this sense about why forgiving is important. It is not that God has been holding back for us to act first. What our forgiving another does is to open us to experience the forgiveness God is already offering.

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." One could separate this phrase as two separate petitions, or requests to God, but I am going to keep them together. "And

¹ <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories-library/wilma-derksen/> (Accessed January 27, 2024).

² Ibid

do not bring us to the time of trial” is how that line runs in the translation I read of Luke’s account of the Lord’s Prayer. “Temptation”—I do not think that the word “temptation” refers to my sometime desire for a second piece of chocolate cake for dessert when I know I should stop at one. The request to be spared from temptation and from evil is the request for strength to resist succumbing to all things that run contrary to God’s way, to what God wants to see in our world.

To live a life that aligns with what we believe God wants to see in our world, intends for our world, puts us at odds with much of the world as it currently exists. Ensuring that all have bread to eat, to pick up on an earlier part of this prayer, runs counter to the prevailing philosophy that says I need to gain as much as I can for myself and not really worry about others. If they are not doing well, tough, that is their fault.

To push this point a little further, the apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, writes about how he knows what he wants to do but finds himself doing the opposite. He writes: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me” [Romans 7: 15-20]. When I think about Paul’s words here, I think about people who have an addiction—to alcohol, or gambling, or pornography, or whatever. People with an addiction can want very much not to do that thing to which they are addicted, but they find they cannot help themselves. So, they engage in the activity again, and the action is then often followed by a period of self-loathing, self-loathing for the harm their activity has caused to family members and others who love them. While we may not have an addiction, we live in a world that encourages us in multiple ways to live according to a set of values different from that to which following Jesus calls us. And, on the point of addiction, remember what it is that

Alcoholics Anonymous does. It encourages its members to reach out to a higher power. That is what we do when we pray these words: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

“For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever, Amen” I am going to say very little about this concluding doxology of the Lord’s Prayer. It is not a petition like the other parts, not a request to God to do something such as give us the bread we need or deliver us from evil. Rather, it is a reminder, at the end of the prayer, of the one whose kingdom we seek, God’s kingdom, not ours, the one whose power is greater than that of any other creature, though we have power and therefore freedom, and the one to whom we offer praise.

“Lord, teach us to pray,” his disciples asked him. May we do so. And to the one who made us, to Jesus, through whom we have come to know God most fully, and to the Holy Spirit, God presence with us now and with us always, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

Resources

<https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories-library/wilma-derksen/> (Accessed January 27, 2024).

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