"Forgive Us Our Debts, As We Forgive Our Debtors"
A meditation by the Rev. Brian D. Ellison
The Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 14, 2010

Texts: Psalm 32; Matthew 5:21-26; 6:14-15

“The Problem of Forgiveness.” That’s the title of one sermon I saw this week on this passage. “The Forgiveness Matter” was another. “The Issue of Forgiveness” was another.

It’s all sort of interesting. In all the previous weeks of researching other petitions from the Lord’s Prayer, I don’t recall any sermons with titles like “The Problem with Daily Bread” or “The Issue of Hallowing God’s Name” or “The Kingdom Coming Matter.”

No, it’s hard to believe anyone could a problem with forgiveness. Hard to believe … until you read what Jesus says and think about what he could possibly mean.

“Forgive us our debts”—no problem there—“as we forgive our debtors.” Hmm, potentially problematic. For clarification, then, we listen to the words Jesus says right after the Lord’s prayer, the only commentary he provides on the whole prayer, what one commentator calls the “forgiveness P.S.”: “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.”

Now, we have a problem.

We have a problem because we’ve been raised from birth in this place to believe that God’s forgiveness is not dependent on our actions—that God reaches out to us in grace and mercy to heal and forgive us in spite of ourselves.

We have a problem because Jesus’ death and resurrection for the sake of the sins of the world has left us “ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven”—just like the hymn says—and our obedience and love for others is supposed to grow out of gratitude, not guilt—joyful service, not obligatory obedience.

We have a problem because, well can I be honest about this, we aren’t always so good at forgiving others. In fact, I dare say that everybody here, age 8 to 108, visitor or member or elder … or pastor! … has at some point struggled…

…to let go of our quite legitimate unhappiness with how we were treated,
…to drop our anxiety about the bad choices made by someone in whom we have invested time or energy or love,
…to put aside distrust or dislike and sit down for a meal or a work session or a common cause.

In fact, maybe some of us are here right now, not forgiving. In church. And yet here we are, week in and week out, praying “Forgive us our debts.” Asking, expecting, receiving God’s forgiveness, a

forgiveness we have a hard time offering ourselves. That’s the problem of forgiveness. Fortunately, it’s a problem that has a solution.

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The preacher Fred Craddock tells a sort of funny story about forgiveness. He gives credit to another preacher, an old country preacher Paul Culpepper, who preached revivals—you know, tent meetings—in Tennessee. Preacher Paul says that once when he was about to start a big two-week revival once, the town’s pastor came up to him. “Now, we’re going to have to do something at the beginning.”

“What’s that?”
“We’re going to have to call for the fellowship and peace of the church?”
“Why?”
“Well, I’m the one that’s done wrong. You know, I’m a married man, got a good family and all, but I asked a certain widow in this town for a date. I shouldn’t have done it. She turned me down, but then she went and told everybody. Now, that’s all over the church and that’s all over town. So, you have to call for the fellowship and peace of the church.”

So that’s what he did. That’s not a term I was familiar with; neither were Fred Craddock’s listeners—he explains that “calling for the peace and fellowship of the church” means everybody sits down, the minister says “All who are in true fellowship with God and each other please stand.” And just about everybody stands, but not the pastor in this case. Then everybody else sits down and he stands up and says “Everybody knows what I did. It was wrong, and I regret it. I’ve been wringing my heart out in sorrow and regret, but I want you to forgive me.”

Preacher Paul said “Is there a motion that we forgive the brother?”
One man jumped to his feet and said, “I move we forgive him. I’ve done the same thing a dozen times!” His wife looked at him, … and everybody turned around and looked at him. And they forgave the preacher, but then they had to have another meeting to call for the peace and fellowship of the church. They forgave him, too, he said he hadn’t meant it literally.

But Preacher Paul said that the little incident triggered something unexpected. Instead of a two week revival, they had two weeks of “weed-pulling.” There was stuff that needed to be worked out, and before they could speak with any meaning about faith and redemption, about sin and forgiveness, they had to work out the ways they had wronged one another.

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I’ve come to the conclusion that “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” is the most important line in the whole prayer. Actually, Martin Luther came to that conclusion quite some time before I did. He pointed out that this is the only place in the prayer where we make sort of a “contract” with God—it’s the deal we make to fully receive the blessing we seek. It’s the place where Jesus asks us not just to pray by saying something, but by actually doing something.

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2 Greatly paraphrased from Fred Craddock in *Craddock Stories*, edited by Mike Graves (publishing info to be inserted here).
Here might well be the first step in solving “the problem.” Let’s not assume that Jesus is trying to turn on its ear everything else we know about grace. Instead, let’s hear this for what we’ve known it all along to be: It is a lesson about prayer.

And one of the things that you and I tend to think about prayer is that it is a very private matter. We go into our quiet place to pray. Even when we pray in a group, we think about it very vertically: It establishes a connection between God and me, or God and us. Requests flow up, and answers flow down.

But right here in the middle of the Lord’s Prayer, the Lord introduces a very horizontal concept. Part of the prayer is a commitment to do something toward other people. And our “vertical” connection to God is all tied up with what kind of “horizontal” connection we are making with others.

The point, Jesus would seem to say, is that you really aren’t praying for forgiveness from God if you aren’t in relationships that display forgiveness. You can’t ask God for it until you have learned for yourself just how much you are asking for. And when we do persist in asking God to forgive us without actually showing forgiveness, we make a mockery of our own prayers. We are just saying words that don’t really have meaning for us. This instruction from Jesus is a plea for authenticity—only ask me for things when you really understand your own request.

And here’s where Matthew’s language about “debts” (instead of the more specific “sins” or “trespasses”) makes this prayer even more meaningful for us. The language of debts really applies to anything we are owed by others—our debtors are people we have something on, someone whose I.O.U. we are holding. So maybe they did “trespass against us.” Or maybe they just really have been annoying us. Maybe they did “sin against us,” or maybe they are simply people who require extra tender loving care. Maybe they have wronged us intentionally, but maybe they just have different ideas, a different style, a different outlook on life or religion or politics or family or friendship that sets us on edge and drives a wedge between us and them.

But Jesus says that when we pray, it only makes sense to ask God to forgive our debts when we forgive our debtors. We let it go so we can understand what God is doing when God lets our stuff go. We bear with in order to fully grasp what it means for God to bear with us. We clear the slate of wrongs and grudges and wounds so that we can bask unencumbered in the all-encompassing cleansing goodness of our Savior.

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We may not need to have a meeting to call for the fellowship and peace of the church. But we certainly do need to tend to our relationships with one another, as we approach our Lord’s table, as we sing our Lord’s praises, and as we seek our Lord’s forgiveness. May we forgive as God has forgiven us, and may we know in new measure, the grace and mercy of God. Amen.