Karl Menninger, the famed psychiatrist, once said that if he could convince the patients in psychiatric hospitals that their sins were forgiven, 75 percent of them could walk out the next day! Hummm.... What a difference forgiveness can make!

Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery, “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more!”

Jesus said to Zaccheus, that little guy who was up in a tree, “Salvation has come to your house today.”

Jesus said to the paralytic lying outside the gate, “Your sins are forgiven. Rise and walk!”

Jesus said on the Cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

Hummm... What a difference forgiveness can make!
I read one commentary that said these words should be translated like this: “Forgive us our sins, in proportion as we forgive those who sin against us.” Forgiveness is not something we earn. It would be foolish if we thought we could earn God’s forgiveness just by forgiving others. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. A little child said who had misunderstood the prayer: Forgive us our trash cans, as we forgive those who put trash in our cans. Hummmmm.... Forgiveness is an empowered form of giving.

Every gift is a present, and in many ways every gift is an offering. We do not earn gifts, we are given gifts. People do not earn gifts, they are offered gifts. We can not demand a gift! And as such, nobody can demand forgiveness. We only give forgiveness as an empowering gift.

Remember this scene from Les Miserables, Jean Val Jean is paroled after nineteen years of imprisonment for stealing a loaf of bread. The years have turned Jean into a hardened criminal. After wandering around the community, the Bishop finally takes him in and serves him supper, makes his bed and treats him with utmost hospitality. Jean rewards the bishop’s kindness by making off with all the silver in the middle of the night. The next morning, before breakfast, there is a knock at the door. The authorities have arrested Jean and brought him to the bishop for the crime to be confirmed.
But to everyone’s surprise, the bishop hands over the candlesticks and says, “Jean, have you forgotten that I gave you these, as well?” To a freed man the bishop says, “My brother, you no longer belong to what is evil, but to what is good. I have bought your soul to save it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition. I give you to God.”

Forgiveness is a gift. Who needs that gift from us? As individuals? As a church? As a nation?

"Forgive us our trespasses...I mean debts... or is it sins? Have you ever wondered why Presbyterians say, "Forgive us our debts" while we United Methodists use, "Forgive us our trespasses," Here is the answer I found. "Trespasses" came into use in the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England, a translation made earlier than the King James Version of the Bible in which the translation is "debts." The influence of the Prayer Book has been great on all English-speaking churches, even those not Episcopalian. So therefore a widespread use of "trespasses" began. English-speaking Presbyterians all over the world were influenced by the catechisms of the Westminster Assembly which cite the Lord’s Prayer as the King James Version has it. Presbyterians have used that form ever since. The difference is not theological but historical. Go figure! Today, the commonly accepted
words are: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

Trespasses, debts or sins are the wrongs. The power in this prayer is in the petition to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Trespassing is an activity that I engaged in several times as a kid. There was one neighbors yard that had a posted sign and often balls from a nearby play area went into her yard. We would really work on getting the courage to run in and run out! Entering onto some one property and doing no harm to the property never seemed like a “big” sin to me. That is my only image of trespasses.

The debt image is more vivid because I have a bank account. I get debt! When we speak of sin as a debt, several things happen. One is that we remind ourselves that we are personally responsible for our sins. "The Devil made me do it" is not an excuse. We are responsible for our sins as much as we are responsible for our debt. We cannot say that our sins are an accident and we can we blame another. We are responsible. (Maybe Matthew, the tax collector knew too much about debts!)

Another thing that happens when we use "debts" is that we are reminded that debts can jeopardizes our relationship with God. Has anyone ever owed you money and not paid you, or have you owed and not paid? Did that
affect your relationship? Even if we think it does not, it does. Something stands between us. "Forgive us our debts," so our relationship can be made whole again.

And that sin word, I get that one. Sin is anything that separates me from God. And to be very honest, I get the big sins. I am not out there murdering anyone. I do not steal! I do not intentionally bring harm to anyone. But what about the "little" sinning I do. The times when I should speak out and I don’t... Or the times when I should speak words of justice or even walk away to voice my displeasure. And the times when I do walk by on the other side of the street and I am not the least bit upset.

Biblical forgiveness does not mean excusing something or pretending that it didn’t happen. Some people think that if you forgive someone who has bullied or abused you, you must pretend that the offense didn’t really happen or that it wasn’t so bad after all. It does not mean that you have to expose yourself to more bullying or abuse. We are not called to sugar coat reality but called to cleanse our heart of resentment. It is resentment that can wreck our relationship with God and spoil our hearts and steal our joy.

Forgiveness is not the same thing as pardon. You may forgive someone who wronged you but still insist on a just punishment for that wrong. Your neighbor’s son breaks
into your house and steals your large flat screen TV and is then arrested by the police. Because you know and like your neighbors, you have conflict about pressing charges. Yet, the one who steals owes a debt. You have a responsibility to see that he does not steal again. You know that you need to forgive to restore relationships. Your forgiveness even after the arrest and prosecution can be a healing power both in you and in the thief.

Trespasses, debts and sin are so closely related to forgiveness. But not just forgiveness in the sense that we are forgiven for our sins by God but that we need to forgive others as well or this won’t happen. This idea of human forgiveness and God’s forgiveness being tied together is central in Judaism and so Jesus is not introducing a radical, new idea here. But to some of our individualistic, western kind of ears, maybe it sounds this way. A lot of us have the idea that following Jesus is this individual kind of thing. But in reality, following Jesus can never be separated from the people around us. If following Jesus has no impact upon the way that we live our life with people, I would question whether we are actually following Jesus at all. Anyway, God loves us and wants to forgive us but in order to experience this we need to forgive people as well.

Alexander Pope was an English poet who was born in 1688. When he was almost 21 years of age, he wrote a very long poem, often called an essay because of the length. There
are three famous quotes from that long essay/poem on Criticism.

“a little learning is a dangerous thing.”

“fools rush in where angels fear to tread”

And “to err is Human, to forgive, Divine.”

The basis meaning of the last quote is that any human makes a mistake; we need to forgive them as God has shown us divine mercy and forgiveness.

During one period of his life, John Wesley was a missionary in the American colonies—primarily in the area that would become the state of Georgia. There was a general by the name of Oglethorpe with whom Wesley had some dealings. General Oglethorpe was a great military leader, but he had a reputation as a harsh and brutal man. One day he said to John Wesley, “I never forgive.” To which Wesley replied, “Then, sir, I hope you never sin.” Hummmm..... Sinning and forgiving are so closely tied together.

In A Forgiving God in an Unforgiving World, Ron Lee Davis retells the true story of a priest in the Philippines, a much-loved man of God who carried the burden of a secret sin he had committed many years before. He had
repented but still had no peace, no sense of God's forgiveness.

In his parish was a woman who deeply loved God and who claimed to have visions in which she spoke with Christ and he with her. The priest, however, was skeptical. To test her he said, "The next time you speak with Christ, I want you to ask him what sin your priest committed while he was in seminary." The woman agreed. A few days later the priest asked, "Well, did Christ visit you in your dreams?"
"Yes, he did," she replied.
"And did you ask him what sin I committed in seminary?"
"Yes."
"Well, what did he say?"
"He said, 'I don't remember'."
What God forgives, God forgets.

Let me close with a true story that touched my heart. It comes from the book by Marlo Thomas entitled, "The Right Words at the Right Time." The author Amy Tan recalls the awful power struggles she had with her mother when she was a teenager. Her mother criticized her excessively, often humiliating her in front of others, refusing to listen to her side of things. Amy recalls shouting at her mother, "I hate you. I wish you were dead."

Fast-forward 30 years. Amy was now 46. For the past three years her mother had suffered from Alzheimer's
disease. One day when Amy visited her, she said, “Amy, something is wrong with my mind. I feel like I can’t remember many things, even what I did yesterday. I can’t remember what happened a long time ago, but somehow I know I did something to hurt you.”

Amy started to say, “O not really. Don’t worry,” but her mother continued, “I did terrible things. But now I can’t remember what...and I just want to tell you...I hope you can forget just as I’ve forgotten.” Instantly Amy recognized that this was her mother’s plea for forgiveness.

After Amy left, she cried, both happy and sad tears. Something in her chest that had been pent up for a long time was gone. Her mother died six months later. But she had left a wonderful memory. Together they knew in their hearts the glory of forgiving and forgetting. So may it be for us.

Hummmm... What a difference forgiveness makes! Amen!