

LESSONS IN LIVING

The Disciples' Prayer Part VI: Forgive Us Our Debts, as We Forgive Our Debtors

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
March 14, 2010

Scripture Reading, Matthew 18:21-35 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

It's kinda tough, isn't it? It's one of those places where, if we had the sacred white-out, we could take those lines out. But since we don't, I think it would be helpful to look at it and try to understand the passion - where the message of love is in words that seem so harsh to us. Very often, this particular line in the disciple's prayer, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors", or in some traditions "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" is just a little blip on the screen as we're going through it. But it was so important to Jesus that after the prayer he summarizes it in the terms of forgiveness. In a sense you could say that the essence of Christianity is not morality, as other religions in the world have certainly been; that the reason it was called the New Covenant was because of this very strange equation that said that righteousness boils down to this: the measure you use on other people, is what will be used on you. So if you forgive others for what they've done against you, you'll be forgiven.

Now obviously it's more profound than that, but the reason it was called a new covenant was because the mathematics are very different. And those people who teach Christianity as the "holier than thou" type of religion are missing this part of the puzzle: that if there's going to be hope for our species, we need to learn this art of forgiveness. The reason that it's put in such drastic terms is that Jesus is really just talking about God - God as a symbol of all the deep processes of life. And what I think Jesus is trying to say here is if we do not learn how to forgive each other, then we will destroy each other. We will torture each other. You won't need an angry deity to make that come true.

Right before we hear this story, the disciples had been told that the keys of the realm of God have been given to them. Then Peter asks Jesus, well, how many times should I forgive all these scalawags that I run into? If I have the keys to heaven then I need to start the screening process now - who's worthy, who's not worthy. When people make mistakes, how many times should I forgive them before I jettison them? And then Jesus uses the symbol of infinity: not seven times but seventy times that. Christianity was a new way of perceiving the world itself. When we ask the question, how do we forgive, I think we're starting in the wrong place. I think Buddha had it right, that when we see the damage that not forgiving other people does to us, when we see the link between our grievances against other human beings and our own misery, we will drop judgment like the burning coal it is.

So what I'd like to do is to talk about forgiveness using external examples of what really happens inside us. We'll talk about the personal life and we'll talk about the political life because it all weaves in together. I once heard somebody quip that whenever there was a fight in his marriage, that the spouse got

historical. And I said, you mean hysterical? (I didn't know he'd set me up for a joke) . . .this happens on any type of equation, like any relationship, any gender equation. When we get hurt, those things we claimed to have forgiven each other for come back from the grave and we list them off - which says to our partner...*they were never really dead*. Yes, we buried the hatchet but we also marked where it was buried in case we needed it again. This lesson is vital for every relationship you have and for the survival of the species. When the United States says history began on 9/11, it made a date with atrocities that it would commit against people who had nothing to do with it. Isn't that the way it is when you say, "history begins when I was hurt?" And when you finally get to express it, isn't it almost always in the wrong place... to the wrong person? You sit on it, sit on it, and then some poor schlep walks in the door and that's when you dump it all.

[Here's the] first example that I hope will clarify the link between unhappiness and judgment. How many of you would buy a car that didn't have a steering wheel? I'm going to negotiate here – what if it had leather seats? Cruise control? It wouldn't matter, would it? If a car doesn't have a steering wheel, then it doesn't matter what else it has. What Jesus is saying is, when we do not have control over what's happening in our own head, when we don't have control of our own steering wheel, nothing else matters. That will eat away at everything from the inside out if we do not learn to let go of some things. Did you ever realize that when you have a grudge, somebody else is at the center of your story, and you're not? Have you ever really understood that you've got somebody with a big bull's-eye, a target, but that means you're secondary to that? And nothing else seems to make you quite as happy? That if you wanted to live in your highest happiness, you would have to let go of that equation?

I had somebody call last night. Now, I always start pouting on Daylight Savings Time anyway, about a month early. So whenever I preach on these kinds of things, destiny sets it up for me to make a fool out of myself. Last night, I don't know, 2:00 in the morning, somebody calls me. And it's somebody who's made the wrong call maybe 5 times. "No, they still don't live here." "Oh, I'm sorry" – click. Now if I had just let go I would have been back to sleep quickly. But I didn't. I wasn't meaning to, I wasn't trying to, I was very much thinking about the sermon and saying this is a good time to really live out what you're going to be saying tomorrow morning, for example . . .but this is how hard it is. And Jesus isn't saying we could ever do it completely right. But doing it imperfectly is much better than not doing it at all, in terms of getting control again. So the first reason why we let go of our grievances against other people is not that we suddenly find charitable feelings necessarily, but we let go for the same reason that we demand that car have a steering wheel in it. We want it to go where *we* want it to go, and our heart will not go there if we've surrendered control to a grievance.

Question #2: Now this is a somewhat delicate image, so all you squeamish people, cover your ears. How many of you spit on the floor in your house? I mean when it's a long way, you don't want to go outside . . . now I want to think for a moment why that is such a ridiculous thought, and yet we do things in our own head that are much worse than that. We will let feelings in our heads, we rehearse them, we will dump poison into our veins that we would never do externally. We take better care of our cars and our homes than we do of our minds and hearts. If you really love your heart, you will do it a favor and filter hateful thoughts out of it. Because you will probably miss the person you're mad at – the arrow will miss that person – but it will wound you no matter what. That's the bad thing about a grudge; no matter whether it hurts the person you want it to or not, it will damage *your* heart.

So when you get caught in history and you're playing back the things that people have done -and I've just confessed I do it, so this is not sitting in judgment-(I'll do that next week on something I haven't been caught doing yet). But I ran across a wonderful phrase this week, it said "forgiveness is letting go of the

desire to have a perfect past". *Forgiveness is letting go of the desire to have a perfect past.* Your parents weren't perfect, their parents weren't perfect. You've not been a perfect parent either. Do we let go of that or do we let it drag us into the mud? Every day and probably every minute of your life you're faced with the choice between whether you want the unhappiness of yesterday to contaminate the possible happiness of today and tomorrow. Forgiveness is letting go of that. Again, not because you are such a little Jesus, but because you don't want poison pumping through your brain and through your heart.

Third question: third and last question, again it's offensive; not for the squeamish – how many of you have ever been so mad at somebody that you didn't know very well that you would have pushed a loved one off a cliff hoping they would hit them? I mean if you're really mad at somebody would you push off somebody you love and care about, hoping they would fall and hurt that person? And if you wouldn't, then why do that psychologically? Because when I am mad at someone else, when I hold onto that, when I won't let go of it, I cannot be fully present with you. I am handcuffed to somebody not in the room. Our grievances against people who don't care can rob us of relationships with those who do care if we're not very, very careful. Jesus is talking about a worldview where everyone is interconnected and we don't judge one another, not for personal reasons, but because we know we're connected and I know that what I do to me affects you, and what I do to you affects me, and I cannot separate those two. I cannot hate you without hating myself as well. Whenever you have an enemy, that's the best place to find the parts of yourself that you don't love. You want a good teacher, somebody who pushes all of your buttons and will take you right to where you need to grow? I don't want to go there either so you don't have to . . .but this takes us into politics.

Now I know that seems like a hairpin turn, but how we treat other people, *real* other people, is what I think of as politics. When people say they want to be religious but they don't want to be political, what that means, if you lay it all out, is that they have enough power in the culture where they want to have a relationship to God but still mistreat other people. Politics is how we treat one another. It comes from the word for city. Christianity has been tampered with, where it falsely allows you to have a relationship with the common parent of every being and still participate in violence and mistreatment of your brothers and sisters if they're born outside the continental United States...or if they're born looking different...or living differently. This is an abomination in my opinion.

When Jesus prays that it will be on earth as it is in heaven, that's Christianity. I don't know what you call it when you don't care what happens to the world - you're just trying to get your own soul into heaven; I don't know what that's called. But it's not what Jesus is talking about. From the very beginning of his ministry, he talks about a thing called jubilee. And if you don't know what that is, it's very important to learn. It was a day that the world had waited for, where slaves would be free (that sound familiar?) debts would be forgiven, weak people would be lifted up and honored and the strong would be lowered, not to humiliate them, but to calibrate and bring equality to the world. It's there throughout the Jewish scriptures and many great Jewish leaders have lived it out. It's right there in the Christian scriptures, and a handful of Christians have lived it out. The world needs us to connect those two again.

There's a great movement coming from the church to sever those two worlds. I don't know if you all follow Saint Beck? Saint Glenn Beck? Who's defending America, he's defending the church, the flag . . .from people like, well, YOU, quite frankly. Title of the article: Glenn Beck urges listeners to leave churches that preach social justice. So get your shoes ready . . .and I'm going to try this, I think it's human thought, but I'm not sure:

“I’m begging you, your right to religion and freedom to exercise religion and read all of the passages of the Bible as you want to read them and as your church wants to preach them . . . are going to come under the ropes in the next year. If it lasts that long it will be the next year. I beg you, look for the

words 'social justice' or 'economic justice' on your church Web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words.”

We’ve been caught!

Now, am I advising people to leave their church? Yes!" Later, Beck held up cards, one with a hammer and sickle and another with a swastika. "Communists are on the left, and the Nazis are on the right. That's what people say. But they both subscribe to one philosophy, and they flew one banner. . . . But on each banner, read the words, here in America: 'social justice.'”

I wish Hitler hadn’t talked so much about social justice, don’t you?

They talked about economic justice, rights of the workers, redistribution of wealth, and surprisingly, democracy."

So, any of you that talk about justice and want to treat other people fairly, shame on you, shame on all of you! There’s coming the day where we will have to choose whether to follow Jesus means to face this kind of hostility from the church. It’s always been that way, however. Powerful people take over the most loving things and out of their fear, misuse them. But I want to tell you that the *religion, if you were taught it, which tells you to have a one-on-one relationship with God or with Jesus and that rationalizes mistreating real human beings in the real world is a pacifier that somebody put in your mouth to keep you quiet*. It is not the religion of Jesus Christ. And the world needs those willing to go out and talk about a radical kindness, a radical gentleness that only sounds contradictory because we don’t hear it. A gentleness that goes to the very roots of our being, and an unwillingness to participate in the oppression of others.

But the road to that universal love goes straight through the path of forgiveness of nations, of national debt . . . of the past wrongs we’ve done one another. It goes through that path whether you’re talking about your family, whether you’re talking about your work, whether you’re talking about within yourself letting go of what you’ve done that you falsely thinks disqualifies you from your calling. How do you let go of it? That’s not really the question. If you understand the link between that judgment and your unhappiness, you will let go of it. You wouldn’t buy a car that didn’t have a steering wheel, you wouldn’t spit on the floor of your own house, you wouldn’t throw somebody you love over a cliff to wound someone else. If you will go into your own heart, maybe call it a prayer, and see the link between your judgment of others and your own unhappiness, you yourself will let go of judgment as the burning coal it is.

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The Disciples' Prayer Series

Part I: February 7, 2010, Matthew 6:7-13 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part II: February 14, 2010, John 14:1-4; 8-19 (*The New Oxford Bible*);
World Scripture: Chandogya Upanishad

Part III: *Hallowed Be Thy Name.* February 21, 2010, John 8:30-59; Exodus 3:13-17 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part IV: *Thy Kindom Come.* February 28, 2010, Matthew 6:25-31 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part V: *Our Daily Bread.* March 7, 2010, Exodus 16:13-21 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part VI: *Forgive Us Our Debts.* March 14, 2010, Matthew 18:21-35 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part VII: *Lead Us Not Into Temptation.* March 21, 2010, Matthew 4:1-11 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part VIII: *For Thine is the Kindom.* March 28, 2010, Acts 4:32-5:6 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

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