**February 18, 2024 1st Sunday of Lent Matthew 6:9-18**

***Forgiving Others***

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:9-18

*(9)"Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. (10)Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. (11)Give us this day our daily bread. (12)And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. (13)And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. (14)For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; (15)but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (16)"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. (17)But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, (18)so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. NRSV*

**Notes:**

1. Sometimes we force ***forgiveness***.
   * 1. “*But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*”
   1. ***Lent*** is a season for prayer and fasting;
   2. Lent is a season of confession, repentance, and a focus on ***forgiveness***.
2. Matthew 6 is a call against the ***hypocrisy*** of the time
   1. Giving to the poor turned into a way to receive ***praise***
   2. Many times people prayed to be seen and ***approved***.
   3. Do not neglect formative practices but do them ***privately***.
3. Jesus placed ***Forgiveness*** in the middle of this passage,
   1. Forgiveness is supposed to be the ***response*** of those who have been ***forgiven***.
   2. The person *with* the power is ***responsible*** to forgive..
   3. Forgiveness shouldn’t be something we ***manipulate***.
4. We need to conduct a ***Self*-*Examination*.**
   1. Are there sins that have been done to us that we are ***holding*** ***onto***?
   2. Are there times when we ***bullied***, or ***harassed*** others in unhealthy ways to forgive?
   3. Where do we recognize we have ***sinned*** and need to seek ***forgiveness***?
5. ***Forgiveness*** is release of our need for something we’re owed.
   1. In Lent we are called to ***forgive*** what is owed to us,
   2. Forgiveness doesn’t mean we ***return*** to the way things were.
   3. Christ is ***faithful*** and ***just*** to forgive us.

**Script:**

Forgiveness is a difficult topic to talk about in our world. I remember as a child getting into altercations with my siblings and many times one or all of us would be told to apologize to the others. You know when I felt as if I was in the wrong, I would have no problem apologizing. But when I felt as if I was in the right, it was unfair to make me say something I did not agree with or believe. And then to top it all off, if I was being apologized to, was I forced to accept their apology, and would I truly forgive them? Or, is it all a lie?

You see, at the present time we live in a culture that loves to make non-apology apologies, where we say things like, “I’m sorry you feel that way,” or, “I didn’t mean to hurt you,” or even, “It was just a joke.” This kind of halfhearted attempt to make amends cheapens forgiveness and places a significant amount of blame on the one who has been wronged without appropriate accountability for the person who did wrong.

Today in our passage we are looking at the Lord’s Prayer. In this passage we will enter into our Lenten journey and see what we can learn from this passage. I will be reading from the NRSV version of scripture because it talks a little different from what we are used to. Join me in the reading, the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray and this is what he said.

*(9)"Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. (10)Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. (11)Give us this day our daily bread. (12)And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. (13)And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. (14)For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; (15)but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (16)"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. (17)But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, (18)so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:9-18 NRSV*

Sometimes we force forgiveness in ways that are not helpful and may even be harmful. In particular in church contexts, we sometimes—with the best of intentions—tell victims of abuse that they must forgive in order to move forward. Although we might mean well and truly believe that forgiveness liberates us, deciding for someone else when they should forgive the person who harmed them creates an atmosphere where the wronged party is in a position to be blamed for not forgiving while the offender is not held accountable

These factors make approaching our text this week a challenge. Because of the immense amount of baggage the idea of forgiveness carries, especially for the abused and oppressed, it would be easy to gloss over or ignore verse 15: “But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” It would be easier, on this first Sunday in Lent, to skip past Jesus’s words of forgiveness altogether, and instead focus on prayer or fasting. After all it is the season for prayer and fasting! But Lent is also a season of confession and repentance, and tied up in the midst of all of those things is a focus on forgiveness.

Lent is also a season when we confront the hard things of life instead of avoiding them—our sin, our brokenness, our humanity, even our own mortality. So instead of glossing over it or repeating shallow platitudes about the need to forgive, we must confront and wrestle with this difficult topic.

So we begin by looking at **Hypocrisy.** The context for **Matthew 6 is a call against the hypocrisy of the time** specifically surrounding the ways people gave to the poor, the ways people prayed, and the ways people fasted.

Giving to the poor was a common practice at the time. Jewish people gave at the synagogue, and pagans gave at their own temples. Giving to the poor often turned into a way to receive public accolades and praise from others so that giving became less about an outpouring of love and compassion and more about attention, power, and social capital. At times, giving was also viewed as *quid pro quo*—a way to manipulate the gods into doing something for the giver in return.

Praying was also a common practice. Jewish people prayed in the synagogues, and pagans prayed on street corners and in temples. In both cases, many times people were praying to be seen and approved by others. Luke 18 has a story about the difference between praying publicly for show and praying privately only to God. The Pharisee prays with arrogance and thanks God he is not like the sinner. The tax collector, in contrast, prays humbly and with a contrite heart. Pagans prayed lengthy, flowery prayers, thinking the precise, intellectual qualities of their prayers would get them what they wanted.

Fasting was a third common practice. Jewish people fasted according to their law, and pagans fasted in order to garner favor with their gods. It was popular for anyone who fasted in this time period to make themselves look more destitute so everyone would know they were being pious and devout by fasting. They had ways of marking their faces and clothing to demonstrate their own suffering so they could garner public approval.

Jesus’s advice is not to neglect the formative practices but to do them privately rather than publicly in order to avoid hypocrisy. When you give, do it so anonymously that your left hand doesn’t even know what your right hand is doing. It’s impossible to be praised if no one knows what you are doing. When you pray, do it privately and simply. God doesn’t need to be flattered but hallowed. God doesn’t need to be placated but wants us to come with our sincere petitions. When you fast, go about your normal routines so it’s not obvious you are fasting. Fasting is about formation, not accolade. If no one but you knows you are fasting, your motivation for fasting will change.

This brings us to **Forgiveness.** Since Jesus’s statement about forgiving others is placed in the middle of this passage, right after his prayer instruction and right before his fasting instruction, that means his teaching on forgiveness fits into the larger theme of hypocrisy.

There are two kinds of forgiveness Jesus might be concerned about: forgiving economic debt and forgiving sins. Matthew 18:21–35 tells the ultimate story about hypocrisy in relation to economic debt—the parable of the unmerciful servant who has a great debt forgiven but himself refuses to forgive a small debt. Some translations of the Lord’s Prayer, instead of saying, “forgive us our trespasses,” say, “forgive us our debts.” Debt is an economic concept. The Israelites were commanded to practice Jubilee, the periodic forgiving of all financial debt. Those of us who sit under the weight of debt can understand the freedom that might come from having those debts canceled before we’ve paid them in full. What kind of freedom does having a debt canceled open up for individuals and for families?

The Lord’s Prayer specifically might reference economic or financial debt, but Jesus is also concerned with the forgiveness of sins. God forgives us. We forgive others. The concept seems simple, and the parable of the unmerciful servant can apply here too—if we are forgiven of much by God, then we are obligated to forgive much of others. And yes, forgiveness is important!

But sometimes these verses are misused to compel forgiveness from survivors of abuse. When we look at these verses in concert with the parable of the unmerciful servant, we see that forgiveness is supposed to be the response of those who have been forgiven. Nobody is asking a wronged party in this parable to forgive the one who wronged them. Instead, the servant is expected to show the same mercy to others that he was shown.

It is important to consider power dynamics. When someone owes us money, that puts us (the person who lent the money) in the seat of power. The one in power is the one with the ability to cancel the debt. In cases of abuser and abused, the person who is often expected to forgive—the abused—is the one without the power, an idea that is in direct contradiction to this story about the unmerciful servant, which focuses on the person *with* the power as having the responsibility to forgive, or discharge, the debt. The focus is not on the one who owes the money to “forgive” their lender for keeping them in debt.

Remember that the overarching message of the Matthew 6 text is about hypocrisy, not about giving to the poor, praying, forgiving, or fasting in and of themselves. Neglecting the context of the passage is detrimental to our faith and the faith of others.

Numerous studies have been done on the psychological benefits of forgiveness. People who choose to forgive the perpetrators of heinous crimes committed against themselves or loved ones tend to be psychologically healthier on average. Holding onto pain and refusing to forgive can absolutely be damaging, and withholding forgiveness rarely hurts the offending party. Yet everyone has their own journey and timetable for forgiveness, and some will take longer to work through their trauma than others.

Forgiveness shouldn’t be something we manipulate or pressure people into. At the same time, forgiveness *is* beneficial to those who forgive. We can hold both of these truths in tension. God wants us to be healthy and happy. God does not desire us to be harmed physically, emotionally, spiritually, mentally, or sexually. Therefore, while forgiveness should be both preached and practiced, it should not be coerced, nor should it be used as an excuse for offenders to keep sinning, nor should it be used as a reason to stay in toxic, harmful relationships without healthy boundaries.

Jesus’s focus on forgiveness in verses 14–15 is not meant to be a threat we use against others. It is not about pointing out other people’s need to forgive but is instead about examining our own need to forgive. Lent is a time for us to reflect collectively on our own sins, not to point out the sins of others. It is no coincidence that the very next chapter in Matthew warns us against judging others in yet another safeguard against hypocrisy and against pressuring others in unhealthy and damaging ways. We are not to look at the lack of forgiveness of others but only at our own lack of forgiveness toward others.

We need to conduct a **Self-Examination.** What would happen if we examined the debts others owe us in our own lives in light of this scripture? Sometimes relationships are ruined over things as simple as $20 debts. How would forgiving these debts create freedom, both for ourselves and for others?

Are there sins that have been done to us that we are holding onto? Whether we are waiting for an apology or something greater, what is being robbed from us in the waiting? What can we release in order to find greater freedom? Where are we hypocritically calling others to forgive? Or seeking applause for our displays of forgiveness? What would it look like to forgive in secret, just like we are asked to pray and give in secret?

Are there times when we bullied, coerced, or harassed others in unhealthy ways to forgive? How can we make these situations right? How can we create a safer environment for those who have been victims? Are there times when we have been bullied, coerced, or harassed into unhealthy forms of forgiveness? Remember that God does not want us to be harmed. Is there an action we need to take to live life more abundantly?

Where do we recognize that we have been the one who has sinned and need to seek forgiveness? What does a true apology look like? What does it look like to seek forgiveness while respecting the healthy boundaries of others?

Forgiveness is deeper than forced apologies. Forgiveness is when we release our need for something we feel we are owed, sometimes in a literal sense. When we pray the forgiveness part of the Lord’s Prayer, we are praying into existence a kingdom where we are equals who do not hold things over others.

In Lent we confront the hard truth that we are called to forgive what is owed to us, to release the pain of our wounds. But we also know that we live in a messy world where some wrongs are unspeakable. We know that God desires good for us and not harm, so we acknowledge that forgiveness doesn’t mean we return to the way things were.

In Lent, we also confront the hard truth that often we are hypocrites who seek praise even in the ways we forgive, and who find it easier to point out the sin of others than to examine our own hearts. We confess, we repent, and we seek a different way. As we do this hard work of forgiving, of laying down our hypocrisies, and of holding in tension challenging truths, may we find a God who is slow to anger and quick to forgive. May we remember that Christ is faithful and just to forgive us (1 John 1:9).