

“PRAYING YOU, ME, US, WE”

The Rev. Victor Kim

Matthew 6:9-13, Psalm 103:8-13

(10-10-21) Thanksgiving Sunday

As we mark this Thanksgiving Sunday, we recognize that there is much to be thankful for, even in the midst of all we're still going through. Despite our many complaints we are among the most fortunate people on the planet, enjoying stability, security, a standard of life that is the envy of the vast majority of the world. Our world is suffering from a global pandemic, but we in Canada are one of the most vaccinated nations on earth, with access to multiple vaccinations for every person in the country, as opposed to too much of our planet which doesn't even have access to one shot per person. As of this past week, almost 72% of the population of Canada has been doubly vaccinated. In the US that figure is 55%. In the UK its 66%, Korea 59%, India 19% and most of Africa hovers under 5% of the population being doubly vaccinated.

And of course it's not just around issues related to the pandemic that we as Canadians have much to be thankful for. We also note the fact that in our nation nearly all people have the freedom to worship in any faith tradition with almost no restrictions or reprisals. So we gather this morning as a community of faith, as Christians, as disciples of Jesus Christ, with gratitude and thanksgiving for so many things.

We've been working our way through the Lord's Prayer over the past few weeks. We have acknowledged that prayer is the practice and act of bending our lives toward God. We realize that to pray this way requires regular, daily practice since bending toward God is not a natural act for us. Today we come to the petition in the Lord's Prayer that seeks God's forgiveness. ***And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*** Debts, sins, trespasses, it really doesn't matter too much which word we use, the meaning is similar enough. We pray that God will forgive us and that we too will forgive others. Seems pretty straightforward, but every one of us knows how difficult this portion of the Lord's Prayer really is to live out. To truly bend this way is going to take a lot of effort.

But let's begin with an observation. To pray this petition, forgive us our debts, implies that we are accountable to someone beyond ourselves, that, as Will Willimon and Stan Hauerwas put it, ***we are not the sole authors of our life stories.***¹ Think about it. If we were autonomous creatures, fully independent, accountable to solely ourselves, why would we ask for forgiveness? Why pray to a God for forgiveness unless we believe that somehow we are not our own, but that we are accountable to God? Why seek forgiveness if we haven't offended anyone? But we always pray for forgiveness, each week, each day, because we do believe that

¹ William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, "Lord, Teach Us – The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life." p.81

our relationship with God is central to our life stories and that being reconciled to God, being at peace with God is not only desirable, but essential to our life and living.

So the question becomes, ***what kind of God is it to whom we pray?*** What is the nature of this God to whom we petition to forgive our sins? And it is here that we find true reason for gratitude and thanksgiving, for as the Psalmist writes, ***the Lord, our God, is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities... As far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.*** Our God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Those words are like beautiful music to our ears, a salve and ointment for our souls. The God to whom we pray, the God to whom we belong, the God to whom we are accountable, is a God who doesn't deal with us according to our sins or repays us according to our iniquities, but removes our transgressions from us. ***I'm not sure there's a better reason to be thankful for today.***

Imagine a God who was vindictive, who remembered each wrong and every mistake, who kept a list and made sure you got what was coming to you. Imagine the fear and terror we would live in if our God was cruel and unkind, with a quick temper and a rage filled heart. But the good news is that our God is like a father who has compassion for his children, whose love is as great as the heavens are high above the earth.

We pray to God to forgive us our debts, not only hoping that God will, ***but knowing that God has.*** I've said this before but it bears repeating, often, because the principle is so important. I lived most of my life believing that you had to seek God's forgiveness, that we had to confess and repent of our sin **before** God would forgive us. You might think, well, isn't that right? But I don't think it is, not at its core. What I mean by that is this. Some years ago I read a book by an Episcopal priest named Robert Farrar Capon ***who argued that forgiveness comes before repentance.*** I didn't understand that at first. It had always made sense to me that we had to say sorry, we had to repent so that God would then forgive us. Why would God forgive us when we didn't recognize what we had done wrong, when we hadn't confessed?

But the biblical witness, and the witness of Jesus says otherwise. What is the death and resurrection of Jesus if not the total victory of life over death, light over darkness, love over fear, forgiveness over sin? The efficacy of the cross is complete, total, absolute. On the cross, no sin is not covered and in the resurrection God's redemption covers all creation. But Jesus accomplished these thousands of years before any one of us was ever born. Just because we happen to live 2000 years after Jesus does it mean that Jesus has to die on the cross again for our sins? ***Of course not.*** What has been accomplished has been accomplished once and for all, backwards and forwards, covering the past and the future, all of history and for eternity. That's why Jesus says on the cross, ***it is finished.***

Scripture says in Romans 5:8, ***that God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*** God doesn't wait for us to get it right, to acknowledge our sin, to confess and seek forgiveness before acting. God acts while we are still in our sin. On the cross, in the resurrection, Jesus has redeemed all that is broken and made possible forgiveness for all who will receive it. ***And that's the key, forgiveness has been accomplished, but we have to want it, we need to accept it.*** And when we do recognize our need for it, when we realize that we want it, need it, crave it, when we accept what God has done for us by God's grace in Jesus Christ, we then recognize our need to turn from our old ways, to leave behind our old selves and turn and seek a new direction, and so we confess and repent. ***Our repentance isn't what produces God's forgiveness, rather, it is God's prior forgiveness, offered and available to any who will receive it, that leads to our confession and repentance.*** Only as we come to know the liberating freedom of God's forgiveness in our lives are we then convicted of the absolute necessity to turn from our old ways and repent so that we may embrace that new life as the forgiven people of God.

And what does that new life look like? One characteristic of that new life is our willingness to forgive our debtors, to forgive those who have sinned against us. Let's be clear about this. Our willingness to forgive our debtors ***is not a precondition*** to God's forgiving of us, ***but neither is it then optional for us in response.*** If we have truly received God's forgiveness, if we have really repented of our old ways, if we have turned and become new creations in Christ, we ***cannot*** continue in our old ways, we ***must*** live differently, love differently. That's the mark of the truly forgiven person. As we commit to living differently, as we repent, we forgive others of their debts to us, we forgive those who have sinned against us.

In 1991 Rodney King was an African American man who was brutally beaten during his arrest in Los Angeles for driving while intoxicated. He was beaten by four LAPD officers, hit between 53 and 56 times with a baton and shot with a stun gun. It was all captured on video camera. In 1992, in the subsequent trial of the LAPD officers, three were acquitted and the jury didn't reach a verdict for the fourth officer. That result led to the LA Riots during which a man named Reginald Denny, a white truck driver, was pulled from his truck and severely beaten by a raging gang. His skull was fractured in 91 places. After his recovery, Denny met one of his attackers and shook his hand and forgave him. A reporter, commenting on the scene wrote, it is said that Mr. Denny is suffering from brain damage.²

Bending our lives toward God, living as a people of repentance, forgiving others as we have been forgiven is not easy, and some may accuse us suffering from brain damage. ***Willimon and Hauerwas warned us to not pray this prayer if we don't want to be odd.*** Bending like this is painful and doesn't come naturally to us but praying the Lord's Prayer ***isn't praying that our will be done, but that God's will be done.*** And what God wills is that God's people, all God's

² Ibid, p.78

people, of every colour, creed, background, orientation, what have you, will live with the same mercy and grace that God has first given to us. It's not easy and there's much work to do.

The words of our petition make is also clear that this matter of being forgiven and forgiving others isn't so much an individual thing ***as much as it is a collective, communal thing.***

Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. Individual sin is bad enough, but our collective and communal sins take it to a different level altogether.³ Think of slavery in the U.S. Collectively, a nation, including many religious people, chose to act in a way that treated a group of people as not fully human. It allowed them to ignore the tenants of their faith, that all humans are created in the image of God and instead gave license to beat, whip, rape and kill black people, the consequence of which continues to ravage American society today. In Canada, for all we are thankful for, this Thanksgiving we have been made inescapably aware of the horrible mistreatment, abuse and neglect that have characterized the relationships that Canada has had with Indigenous peoples, especially through the creation of Indian Residential Schools, where children were forcibly taken from their parents, deprived of their culture, their language, their faith, too many abused and ultimately abandoned in unmarked graves, never reunited with grieving parents or communities, the effects of which continue to haunt our society today.

There are so many more examples of collective, communal sin that I could mention and that you can think of. I remember Dr. Richard Topping, President of VST saying to us earlier this year that he was most amazed at the compassion shown by Indigenous people who still seek reconciliation with those who treated them as less than those made in the likeness of God. What we realize is that there is so much more to do around reconciliation and forgiveness. ***But we can't begin, we can't imagine where to even start, if we don't know what it is to be forgiven, forgiven by the one to whom all of us, all those created in the image of God, are accountable.*** But because we do know that, because in Jesus Christ, we have forgiveness, as people who know the liberating power of being forgiven, we need to work tirelessly to work for a society where that power of being forgiven is known by more and more people.

We have so much to be thankful for today, ***but the most thankful thing is to know that we pray to a God who refuses to let sin have the last word in our stories.*** Let us pray this prayer, forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors, so that we will be a people who will bend to God's will, and let us commit to praying this prayer until we can pray it by heart.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

³ Ibid, p.82