

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

The Lord's Prayer: Our Unity

July 28, 2019

Pastor Jacob Snowden

Jonah 4:1-4, 11

Matthew 6:14-15; 7:1-5

As We Forgive...Relatively Speaking



Jack Baumgartner (1999) "Jonah and the Gourd Vine"

Matthew 6:12-15; 7:1-5

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. 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. Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

--The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God.

This morning we are continuing our summer sermon series on the Lord's Prayer. For those keeping track, this is sermon 10, but if you have missed a few, so have I. Allow me just one minute to say how excited Sara and I are to be here. We've had just barely over two weeks here, and already we have felt such warmth and hospitality from so many of you—from offers to babysit and have dinner, or show the sights, to basketball. The root of the word "enthusiastic" means God-infused. And I feel the enthusiasm at Woods. I hope you do too.

Today we are taking a second week to explore forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer. Last week Susan talked about God's forgiveness. To simplify, we might say that last week was about the vertical dimension of forgiveness, and today we are talking about horizontal forgiveness, the forgiveness we extend to one another and perhaps to ourselves. As I thought about the intersection of these axes, I thought of Jonah, the pouting prophet.

You might remember the story of Jonah, or at least the big fish. If you don't, then it goes something like this:

Jonah hears from God that he is to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh. Jonah's job is to foretell of Nineveh's destruction and rail against its wickedness. But Jonah, being no fan of Nineveh, boards a ship bound in the opposite direction. At sea, a great storm shakes and rattles the ship in such a way that the mariners are convinced beyond doubt that the sudden storm is a sign of an almighty anger directed to someone on board. The sailors cast lots to discover the culprit. Jonah encourages the sailors to throw him overboard, so at Jonah's own urging, he is tossed into the tumult of the sea where he is swallowed up by his prophetic purpose. All of that is in chapter one!

In chapter two we learn that Jonah prays from the belly of the fish. The Lord speaks to the fish, which gets a tummy ache and the NRSV reads, "spewed" Jonah onto dry land. Virtually every other translation reads "vomited," but I looked with hope that the King James might read "vomiteth."

From the shore Jonah makes his way to Nineveh and preaches the word God spoke to him— *Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!* He does not say, "Repent!" or, "Turn from your wicked ways!" But when he preaches his hellfire and brimstone message, the people fast, dress in sackcloth, and sit in ashes. The King decrees that all must make the signs of repentance because (Chapter 3 Verse 9):

Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish. And that's exactly what we read that God did.

All of this is very displeasing to Jonah. "God! I knew you would do this!" This is Eugene Peterson's translation:

"I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness! So, God, if you won't kill them, kill me! I'm better off dead!"

I am sure that I have seen in frilly letters on a coffee mug, *You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.* Yet this is no comfort to Jonah. So God asks Jonah, *Is it good for you to be angry?* Why would someone, anyone be angered at God's love and mercy?

How would you frame Jonah's discontentment? Dr. Pinchas Kahn of Yeshiva University wrote, "Jonah's entire argument, in a nutshell, is that there must be some limits to God's mercy and forgiveness." Jonah is asking that God's forgiveness be tempered by justice.

Jonah does not answer God's question about why he is angered. He doesn't offer a treatise on the place of righteous indignation. Instead, he goes to a hilltop and builds a shady booth or

shack, waiting to see what will become of Nineveh. I imagine he has popcorn and soda waiting to see the calamity and fireworks that are to befall this wretched city. And God appoints a shady vine to grow over the booth. Jonah is happy about the vine. But then we read that God appoints a worm to eat the bush, so it withers. The sun grows hot, the wind feels like a hair dryer in Jonah's face, and he repeats, *It is better for me to die than to live!*

So God says rhetorically to Jonah, "You care for the vine and its welfare, but not the 120,000 people and livestock." That is the end of the book, except that I can't help but hear a patient though disappointed tsk, tsk, tsk, from God.

Every week, when we pray, *Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*, just what are we asking? Are we asking for God to be gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing? Or are we asking God, like Jonah, to act with justice and maybe even a bit of vengeance. Where, God, is your anger and intervention for the suffering that people encounter so often?

Let's do a thought experiment. Imagine as a rule that God forgives sins in exactly the way we forgive. Is this not, in fact, what we pray for? God, forgive us as we forgive. Just as we forgive. Not more or less than we forgive.

Jesus says to Peter in Matthew 16, *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on Earth will be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on Earth will be loosed in heaven.* Jesus says the same thing to the other disciples in Matthew 18:18. In our thought experiment you are the keeper of the keys. You stand guard at the pearly gates. Trespassing is your department. No one gets by without your say so, and you can permit whomever you want into paradise. What do you say? Should we let the Methodists in? Dallas Cowboy fans?

If Jonah were the keeper of the keys, the arbiter of an almighty anger, it seems to me Nineveh would be reduced to rubble. If you were the keeper of the keys during a high school heartbreak, would your exes have incurable face warts? That is a petty thing, but beyond pettiness in our thought experiment I wonder what it would mean to step into the so-called "wrong side of history." If you are the keeper of the keys, how do you enforce or embrace the trespassers when it comes to homosexuality and homophobia? If it is up to you, what becomes of persons of color and those prejudiced of color? How would you judge the hawks and doves when it comes to issues of violence?

In this thought experiment, we are playing around with the word "trespass," which doesn't appear in the Lord's Prayer proper but in the two sentences of annotation after the prayer. Jesus says, *If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive your trespasses.*

Personally, that word makes me think that God is touchy, like a meter maid just itching to write a ticket. Otherwise it makes me think God is like Clint Eastwood in *Gran Torino*,

brusquely saying “Get off my lawn.” Yet I want to offer just a few short observations about how trespasses might be a good image to help us think about sin and forgiveness.

Consider that Jesus is talking about personal boundaries. That’s open for interpretation, but that’s what I want us to consider today. Etymologically, the root of the word relates to falling out-of-step, over-stepping, or slipping. With this in mind, consider that Jesus is drawing attention to the times when people slip or overstep personal boundaries. People set up personal boundaries all the time. We are bound by schedules, habits, obligations, and decorum. If you are planning to go to brunch after worship, and this sermon goes long—I’m walking into your lunch time. Is a long sermon a sin? I don’t think so, but it is understandably intruding on your time. If I talk to my wife, Sara, about a meal she prepared, I’m treading on her sense of ability and accomplishment. Is it a sin to dislike eggplant? No. But if she has worked hard to do something with it, then perhaps I am offering unwelcome and unwanted commentary—I’m trespassing. (Sidebar, she won me over with Eggplant-Caprese Sliders.)

So point one: when others enter our personal space—mental, physical, emotional, or spiritual—we keep the keys of forgiveness or fault-finding. We can choose mercy and judgment.

Second: boundaries are permeable, not permanent. You cross the threshold into this room because the doors are wide open. None of you are trespassing here. You belong. But if you come at 2:00 in the morning, perhaps that’s a different story. We are meant to cross boundaries. This is true of non-physical boundaries too. Think of the start of a romance. To flirt is to find people’s boundaries. You make eye contact, you stand next to one another, you talk, you sit, maybe you touch, you walk out together. Maybe you hug. Maybe you kiss. All the while two people are letting down their guards, letting people get closer. Very clearly, people overstep, misstep, and make unwanted advances. But with the right person in the right circumstances, boundaries open until, in the words of Pablo Neruda, your hand on my chest is my hand. My eyes close as you go to sleep.

When we forgive others’ trespasses, we are opening ourselves up to the possibility of intimacy, not only romantic intimacy, but the intimacy of friendship, neighborliness, and family. People make missteps, but that need not preclude any and all potential of a relationship.

Point three: strong boundaries can keep us hemmed in as much as they keep others out, which is why broad boundaries must be met with a wide mercy. Eli Saslow’s book, Rising Out of Hatred, chronicles how Derek Black, son of a Grand Wizard of the KKK, grew away from the white nationalism of his father. It all started when a “Rising Star of White Nationalism” who denied the Holocaust was invited to Shabbat dinners every Friday in college. It would be easy for someone to keep a distance from Derek, for safety and security—emotionally and maybe physically. But he was welcomed, and that is what began to change things.

What does this have to do with Jonah? Jonah was a Jew, one of the chosen people of God, whom the Assyrians had conquered. Yet here was God siding with the enemy. So God sends a vine to show, according to Midrash in the Yalkut Shimoni, that God's mercy is not bound to one tribe or people, but extends to the whole world—even the plants and animals. Jonah's boundary for God's grace was too small. The Yalkut gives us an Epilogue, "At that hour Jonah fell on his face and said, 'guide your world with the attribute of mercy for it is written, *To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness.*'"

We can draw petty boundaries. We can count small grievances. So God allows us to set the standard for ourselves as we practice forgiveness with others.

Jesus says forgive others their trespasses so that you may be forgiven. Let the people who overstep your theological, political, and ideological sensibilities get close to you. Look for places where you can extend trust, and when you can't...extend grace. Extend grace so when you over-step, your infractions might be met with the same grace you have extended. The measure with which you offer mercy, is the measure you will receive. So at the intersection of God's mercy and our own, we can find a table, surrounded by people who are not trespassing there, but who belong one to another in grace.

Amen.