Several years ago, right before we moved to the Lake Norman area, a friend from our former congregation in South Carolina gave me a wonderful gift that she had made by hand. It is a quilt made from a number of old t-shirts that had been part of my many years in ministry. T-shirts from camps, conferences, youth retreats and other trips. Each square of the comforter represents a piece of me and holds a special memory for me. I learned something about quilting while she was putting this together. I know we have some quilters in our congregation. Lining up each square of fabric and sewing the pieces together took a great deal of time, patience, and a steady hand.

I know quilting and weaving are not the same thing but I am going to compare the two. Sometimes we think of God’s work in our lives like the weaving of a tapestry. Different threads of the tapestry (or different squares of the quilt) are woven together or sewn together to create a beautiful piece of art. Those might represent different people in relationships, in families, in communities, in churches, even in the world. The point is – we are woven together because God intends for us to be together. We are created for community – for relationship – for love.

Desmond Tutu, in his book No Future Without Forgiveness, describes the concept of ubuntu. Someone who has ubuntu is generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. In other words, one might say – I am human because I belong – I participate – I share. “A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs to a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.” When we treat one another as less than human then we disregard the very Creator who has made us and who has called us good. In essence we begin to tear at the fabric of that quilt or that tapestry and tear at the bonds of relationship.

In the Disney movie Brave princess Merida – defies her mother’s wishes and goes against an age old custom to marry a first born son of a neighboring clan’s king. In an argument with her mother, she takes her sword and places it on a tapestry of their family and cuts it through – symbolically splitting herself off from the family. Her mother becomes furious and they fight – which sends Merida running off to try and find a way to change her fate. She encounters a witch who gives her a spell that will indeed change her fate but not in the way that she thinks. The story emphasizes what happens when individual ambition becomes more important than relationship.

In our text from Matthew this morning we cannot get away from the importance of relationship. The entire chapter deals with it – beginning with the welcome of children, and then a teaching about not being a stumbling block to others – followed by a story about sheep highlighting the importance of every single member of the flock – and then a discussion about the importance of accountability, agreement, and prayer within the community. All this is topped off with Peter’s question and Jesus’ answer relating to forgiveness.

“Lord – how often should we forgive?” Seven times? “No – seventy times seven!” Jesus says. Lets not take that number literally any more than we take the story literally. The point is – relationships are more important than our personal positions. It isn’t about me! It is about us! Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Everything about this prayer that Jesus taught his followers reminds us of the importance of community.

Our own forgiveness is tied to our ability to forgive others. The parable Jesus tells suggests that God’s mercy toward us will not be fully realized if we are not able to learn to show mercy to others. In the Christian tradition there have been different words used in the prayer – debts, trespasses, and sins. Lets take a brief look at each of these words. A debt refers to something which is owed – “a failure to pay that
which is due.” We are all the time encouraged to rack up more and more debt with credit card offers, home-equity loans, new cars, bigger houses, easy payment plans, etc. We expect to have to pay off the debts that we accumulate or suffer the consequences. As it relates to God we might consider our debt being the penalty for not living as we were created to live – a failure to “do our duty” if you will. If we are created in God’s image then we are fearfully and wonderfully made to act as a holy people set apart for God’s purposes. When we do things which are contrary to those purposes or fail to do that which we ought to do as God’s people, then it could be said that we accumulate a debt.

What do we owe God? It’s an interesting question. Some might respond, “our thanks” or “our faithfulness.” Still others might say “our lives.” When you pray, “forgive us our debts” what debt comes to mind? Or do you think about it at all? Part of the reason for this Lenten sermon series is to get us thinking a bit more about the prayer that we pray most every week.

And then there is the word “trespass.” We might think that is a word that “those other denominations” use. But it is found right there in Matthew 6:14 where Jesus instructed the disciples how to pray. “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.” There’s that warning again! So what is a trespass?

As you might imagine – this has to do with crossing boundaries that we are not meant to cross. We all have had conversations about how to maintain healthy boundaries and we have all crossed boundaries that we have set for ourselves. We have had to deal with boundaries that others have crossed which have impacted us. When someone puts up a sign that says, “No Trespassing” they mean – “Don’t cross this boundary!” There are some who take this pretty seriously – like the person who posted the no-trespassing sign with a handgun pointed at you which read – “Prayer is the best way to meet the Lord. Trespassing is faster!” Or the person who posted the sign which read “No Trespassing – Life is Short! Don’t Make it Shorter!” There are a lot more – many of which just aren’t appropriate.

The word translated “trespass” is also translated transgression in other places. It means “stumbling aside” or “a falling away from” or “a false step.” There are many images in scripture which speak of the journey of faith. When we trespass – our journey becomes unfaithful – in other words – we are not walking in God’s ways – we are not walking in the ways of Jesus.

Finally – we come to the word “sin.” It seems to cover the bases, right? Some have thought of sin as “missing the mark” like an arrow missing the bulls eye on a target. Others have thought of it as anything that hurts someone else in some way. At it’s core – the most basic idea behind the word “sin” in the bible has to do with that which is opposed to God. God is good and God’s ways are good. Anything which is contrary to this goodness is sin. Some think of sin – at its core – as idolatry. When we make anything more important than the worship of God we have fashioned an idol and that is sin. In our baptismal liturgy this morning we (will) remember the question – “do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?” Turning from sin and turning to Jesus Christ is the act of repentance. This is our first and most important action in confession and therefore forgiveness. Acknowledging our wrong-doing – admitting our error – changing our heart and mind – and turning to God.

So – back to our parable. The king forgives his servant an enormous debt – 10,000 talents are equivalent to about 150,000 years of wages after he begs him to be patient with him. That same servant refuses to forgive a fellow servant a miniscule amount by comparison after the same plea – “be patient with me.” I am struck by the request for patience. When we read of Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthian church we learn that Love is patient and Love is kind. Both servants of the king are asking for love to be shown to them. And what is given is love – in the form of mercy. The king asked the servant – “shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?”

We often think of mercy as pity or sympathy but it really comes from a much deeper place than that suggests. The Greek word that is translated mercy comes from a Hebrew word that means “uterus.” We read it during our Psalm reading – The Lord is merciful and gracious – slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. One author writes that “mercy is like “womb love, the deeply bonded, intimate, often present love of a mother for her child.”” In other words, mercy comes from a deep place of love and
connection reminding us how we belong together and of the importance of relationship. The king was merciful and the servant should have been merciful to his fellow-servant.

And friends – we should be merciful toward one another. We are connected. God is weaving together a great tapestry. Our sin, our trespass, our debt, tears at the fabric and the thread – pulling us apart bit by bit. Mercy is the work of love that allows us to let go of being right for the sake of the relationship.

I know relationships are a two-way street – and it takes two to tango – and all that. It is hard to forgive when someone is not willing to admit their wrong-doing. It is harder to forgive when someone isn’t there begging you to be patient with them. Forgiveness isn’t easy but it is necessary. It is necessary for the health of the community and it is necessary for your health. When you forgive – whether you are forgiving yourself or someone else – or are setting yourself free from carrying the burden of monitoring the indebtedness of another. You are setting yourself free from the accounting that is involved when we look at someone and remember how they have wronged us – trespassed against us – crossed all our boundaries and tried to sever the ties that bind. Being free of that weight and that responsibility is liberating.

In classic Disney fashion, the characters of the movie Brave do live happily ever after – but not before a great deal of work is done to try and make things right. Princess Merida works hard to repair the torn tapestry but in the end it takes more than needle and thread. It takes her broken heart and her desire to repair the relationship that had been damaged with her mother. It takes both repentance and forgiveness on both their parts.

I suppose womb-love is easier when it is with your own child but perhaps we can learn to practice it toward one another as children of the One True God – who doesn’t deal with us according to our sins – or repay us according to our iniquities – but instead is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

To God be the Glory!

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1 Tutu, Desmond Mpilo, No Future Without Forgiveness (Doubleday: New York, New York, 1997) p. 31