

May the words of my mouth
And the meditations of all our hearts
Be acceptable to you O God,
Our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I have to be honest with you
I have some problems with forgiveness.
It started out kind of cute, actually:
As a kid I was always missing the point
Of the forgiveness part of the Lord's Prayer.
You've probably noticed that there are several different English versions
Of the Lord's prayer—in my life I've learned three different ones.
Including the ecumenical version we pray here.
One of the places the prayer uses different words
is where it talks about forgiveness.

So, when we went to my grandma's church and prayed:

"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

I reasoned that I was six-years-old

I **didn't owe** anyone any money

I didn't need to worry about that one.

When I prayed the prayer at home we prayed:

"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

I was pretty familiar with these big, metal, unfriendly

"No Trespassing" signs on fences and houses.

And I figured as long as I stayed off their property, again, I'd be fine.

As an adult, I'm able to look back and see a problem

Underlying these kind of cute misunderstandings.

For me it suggests a question:

Why did I only feel safe if the prayer *didn't* apply to me?

I probably doubted God's mercy.

I worried that if I *needed* forgiveness, I might not be forgiven.

So it was better to look for loopholes in the language

And pretend not to need forgiveness at all.

Have you ever worried that you wouldn't be forgiven?

I think these doubts about forgiveness are pretty common

And at least one expert agrees with me,

Martin Luther, the Christian thinker and reformer,

wrote that it is human nature for our

"consciences to become terrified" and doubt that God really forgives us.

And that's why we look for loopholes

Or, like Peter in the Gospel lesson today,

We try to figure out how much we have to do

To earn God's mercy.

Those are some of the problems I have with forgiveness

But there's another problem, here.

Before I get any further,

When we talk about forgiveness and forgiving each other,

We should also talk about how forgiveness has been misused in churches

To create outcasts and tell people, "you aren't good enough to be here."

Forgiveness texts from the Lord's Prayer

to the Gospel lesson we heard today

Have been used to silence survivors of sexual abuse

With church leaders teaching that pressing charges

or speaking out against abusers

is bad for reconciliation and therefore bad for the community.

These same texts have also been used to convince spouses

to remain in life-threatening, abusive marriages.

In other words, sometime we use Jesus' command to forgive each other

As a way to shame all those who can't just "forgive and forget."

I think these texts, which have been used for condemnation,

Can be a source of hope and healing

for *all* of us who struggle with forgiveness.

That's important, because on the first read,

All this talk of forgiveness seems to add up to an impossible burden.

There's a merciful God in there, I promise.

But first, let's talk about the parts

that can make these texts hard to live with.

For example, in our first lesson from Genesis, we learn that

After being abused, sold into slavery, degraded and imprisoned,

Joseph forgives his brothers and notes that God used

his suffering for a greater good.

That's a beautiful, amazing action of forgiveness.

But honestly, that's tough to live up to.

Then, in the Gospel of Matthew,

We hear Peter ask,

“How often should I forgive, as many as seven times?”

Peter is asking a very human question here.

It's the question of a terrified conscience.

“How much is enough? What do I have to *do* to be safe with God?

What if I haven't done enough?”

Jesus confronts Peter's fear by multiplying Peter's number,

Because numbers don't matter here.

There is no “enough,” no satisfaction formula for forgiveness.

Then there's Jesus' parable

About the King who forgives the slave's large debt only to find out

That the slave has not forgiven a small debt he was owed.

This parable rings true to me in parts: our debt to God is enormous,

And our debts to each other are relatively small.

But honestly, even under the best circumstances,

I find myself relating to the forgiven-but-not-forgiving slave

Sometimes failing to forgive from my heart.

Like the doubts of a terrified conscience,

Having trouble with forgiving others seems human to me.

Which is why it troubles me that

Jesus offers such strong words of warning,

saying that God will not forgive us

If we don't forgive each other.

His words seem to support one possible

understanding of the Lord's Prayer

That we are only forgiven our sins

if we forgive those who sin against us.

But then we have these merciful lines from the Psalm today:

“God does not deal with us according to our sins,

Nor repay us according to our iniquities.”

God “removes our transgressions from us” because

God “knows how we were made”

The creator “remembers that we are dust.”

This is Good News.

We don’t have to try to find loopholes

in the vocabulary of the Lord’s Prayer.

We don’t have to forgive a certain number of times

in order to be forgiven.

God knows us and loves us anyway.

This is Good News that we can take with us as we read any difficult text.

Taking another look at the Gospel lesson,

Jesus' challenging words

About having to forgive each other

Don't have to be a terrifying burden.

Jesus' challenge leads us right to our need

For Good News about forgiveness.

As my husband, Sean, puts it:

"If forgiveness was easy, we wouldn't need Jesus."

We need Jesus,

Because without his death, resurrection, and promise of new life for us

We would carry the burden of sin ourselves.

And nothing we could *do* by ourselves would ever be *enough*

to be safe with God.

But, because God freely forgives all our sins

That burden is lifted

And we are freed and emboldened to forgive others.

When Peter asks Jesus for a number,
a formula for how to be safe with God,
Jesus shows him that numbers are irrelevant.
God isn't keeping score.

Peter is called, and we are called,
To forgive because we are forgiven,
Not because we need to earn forgiveness.

In Romans Chapter 14, the source of our second reading today
St. Paul urges us to recognize
that Christ is both the **source and the model of our forgiveness.**
Forgiveness comes from Christ,
and Christ is our model of how to forgive.

Yet, Christians still do use forgiveness against people,
To judge others, saying “you aren’t forgiving fast enough,
Or Completely enough
Or sincerely enough.”

Forgiveness can be a painful, even a life-long process.

Mutual reconciliation may not be immediately possible.

And, knowing that, we must *not* read these texts as

Texts of terror, pressuring those who have been oppressed
to forget or excuse.

But rather, with the Spirit’s help,

To eventually forgive for the sake of their own healing
and let that burden go.

It is our deep need for healing

that brings each of us to the foot of the cross

Searching for forgiveness

God's answer to our questions and fears is deeply comforting:

Because of the cross, because of Jesus, we don't have to ask

"How much is enough?"

We don't have to find ways around the "trespasses" and the "debts".

We are freely, completely, forgiven.

That forgiveness, which we did nothing to earn,

Not even forgive others seven or seventy-seven

or seven-times-seventy-seven times

That free forgiveness is what makes it possible

for us to forgive *each other* from our hearts.

In a moment we will sing these words:

'Forgive our sins as we forgive,'

You taught us, Lord, to pray;

But you alone can grant us grace

To *live* the words we say.”

Forgiveness isn't easy.

I think I'll always have some problems with it.

But now, when I pray the Lord's Prayer,

My terrified conscience is deeply comforted

Because God knows us and loves us anyway

God forgives us completely even though we did nothing to earn it.

And that means we really are freed and empowered to forgive each other.

Amen.



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