

***Embracing and Releasing Mercy While Seeking Strength***  
**Message for February 24, 2019**  
**North East United Methodist Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Drew M. Christian**

*This, then, is how you should pray:  
 “Our Father in heaven,  
 hallowed be your name,  
 your kingdom come,  
 your will be done,  
 on earth as it is in heaven.  
 Give us today our daily bread.  
 And forgive us our debts,  
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
 And lead us not into temptation,  
 but deliver us from the evil one.”*

-Matthew 6:9-13

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Last Sunday, February 17th, we took a look at *The Lord’s Prayer* and went through the first few phrases Jesus taught us and what each of them means. We spent time reflecting on what we are saying and committing to when we lift these words to heaven. We do not want these words Jesus taught us, this prayer we lift to God, to be rote and mechanical.

Remember, Don Underwood, in his book, Pray Like Jesus, writes, “*Most Christians know [this prayer] by heart and can easily recite it. In fact, that might be part of the problem: it is so well known and easily recited that most of us never even think about the words as we rattle them off silently or in a corporate worship setting.*”

Let us think about the words...let us look at the next several phrases Jesus taught us.

***“And forgive us our trespasses...”***

There were many years I spent living with guilt and heartache for the things I had done, the ways I had hurt others. The guilt would weigh on me and I would often ask the question many people find themselves asking, “How can God forgive me

knowing what I've done?" I would work harder and harder to try and make up for my mistakes, to show God my contrition and love.

There came the day that I finally understood what Christ had done for me, that God loved "even me," that I could do nothing to earn this love. I John 1:9 tells us, "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*"

Underwood writes, "*Sola fide is how Martin Luther put it: we are saved by grace through faith alone! We cannot be redeemed by our good works. That has been a cornerstone of our Christian theology for centuries. Yet, it is a concept that is difficult for us to grasp...at some basic level most of us wonder how God can really forgive all our sins. Reciting the Lord's Prayer on a daily basis is a powerful way of reminding us that not only are we sinners, but that God's forgiveness and grace is freely available to us every single day.*"

Alexander III was Tsar of Russia from 1881-1894. His rule was marked by repression, and in particular by persecution of Jews. His wife, Maria Fedorovna, provided a stark contrast, being known for her generosity to those in need. On one occasion her husband had signed an order consigning a prisoner to life in exile. It read simply "*Pardon impossible, to be sent to Siberia.*" Maria changed that prisoners life by moving the comma in her husband's order. She altered it to "*Pardon, impossible to be sent to Siberia.*" In Christ God has changed the comma that stood against us.

What transgressions are you carrying? What burdens from the past weigh you down? What sins have you committed that you find yourself reliving each day, overwhelmed by the guilt of what you did or failed to do? Lift your transgressions, your sins, your mistakes, your failures up to God, pray "*And forgive us our trespasses,*" and let the comma that once stood against you be moved *forever*.

*Forever...remember...God does more than just forgive us...*

Underwood writes, "*The most remarkable aspect of our grace-filled theology is that God not only forgives our sins but forgets them as well...*" Underwood continues, "*We humans have the ability to remember forever the slightest insult or smallest betrayal...one of the biggest obstacles to living freely in the kingdom of God is not what God remembers about us, but what we remember about ourselves. The memories we carry with us are so powerful that they can keep us chained to*

*the past...sometimes we carry around painful or scary memories that will not turn us loose..."*

Hebrews 8:12 is a reminder of God's words to Israel and to us, "*For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins NO MORE.*"

Have you ever had the experience where you go to the altar, you fall to your knees beside your bed, you confess your sin and thank God for forgiveness, and then you pick your sin up again and carry it home or to bed with you? We must walk through the final stage of forgiveness.

Underwood explains the stages of forgiveness. He writes, "*The first stage of the sequence is trusting that God does indeed forgive us. It means accepting that God's forgiveness is not superficial or temporary but sincere and lasting. The second stage is trusting that God forgets, that God remembers our sins no more. This stage is difficult because of our human tendency to remember the smallest of infractions, our compulsive desire to hold on to painful memories. How can we understand that what is unnatural for us is natural for God? The final and most difficult stage is the forgetting that we ourselves must do. The glory of a full relationship with Christ is found when believers become so confident about God's love that they are liberated from dwelling on all that has gone wrong.*"

Someone asked an elderly Christian lady, "*Does the devil ever trouble you about your past sins?*" She answered, "*Yes.*" When the inquirer asked what she did then, she replied, "*Oh, I just tell him to go east.*" "*What do you do if he comes back?*" "*I tell him to go west.*" "*And when he comes back from the west, what do you do then?*" She said, "*I just keep him going from the east to the west.*"

That elderly Christian lady knows the words of the psalmist. Psalm 103:10-12, "*[God] does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*"

Jesus continues to teach His disciples and us to pray, "*...as we forgive those who trespass against us.*"

Underwood writes, "*Jesus didn't just say, 'Forgive us our trespasses.' The full statement is 'Forgive us our trespasses, **AS** we forgive those who trespass against us.'* I intentionally place emphasis on the word **AS** to demonstrate what I think

*Jesus intended: our liberation from the sins we have committed goes hand-in-hand with our own graciousness towards those who have hurt us...Jesus is making the point that we really are unable to fully receive the grace God offers freely unless we are willing to offer it as well."*

Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:32, *"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."*

Jesus tells us in Mark 11:25, *"And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."*

One of the greatest stories of forgiveness I have found is portrayed in the movie, *The End of the Spear*. The film recounts the story of Operation Auca, in which five American Christian missionaries attempted to evangelize the Huaorani (Waodani) people of the tropical rain forest of Eastern Ecuador.

In 1956, five male missionaries, who made first contact with the tribe, were speared by a group of the Waodani tribe. Steve Saint (the son of Nate Saint, one of the missionaries killed in the encounter) went back years later and became friends with a tribesman Mincayani. Years later, Steve discovered that Mincayani was one of the tribesmen who killed his father. Steve offered him forgiveness and the two eventually formed a strong friendship that continues to this day.

A few years ago I got to meet both of them at a conference. I shook hands with Steve Saint and then I shook hands with Mincayani, the man standing next to him, the man who had killed Steve's father. You could see the love they had for each other. You could see and feel that the kingdom of God had come to earth in their relationship.

I have had so many moments over the course of ministry when I had to forgive, and many moments where I found it difficult to forgive...I found it difficult to forgive people who had attacked me, hurt me, said things that were not true about me because they did not agree with changes being brought to their church...God led me to begin to try to look at those who I believed wronged me as children, His children...to try to imagine them as they might have looked in their elementary school pictures, before the world weighed down on them, before life beat at them, when they were still filled with innocence and hope and imagination...and once I have that picture in my mind, to pray for them...Pray that God would bless them...

Is there anyone in your life who you need to forgive? Anyone you are holding a grudge against or are angry with? As God for the strength to forgive them for how they hurt or angered you, and let the bitterness you are carrying go, remembering how Christ died so that you could be forgiven for the times you have failed, fallen, and hurt others. Pray for the person you are having trouble forgiving, asking God to touch their hearts and bless them. Remember, we must base our forgiveness on what God has done for us, not on what the other person has done to us.

***“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”***

I recently read a story about a little boy named Bobby who desperately wanted a new bicycle. His plan was to save his nickels, dimes and quarters until he finally had enough to buy a new 10-speed. Each night he asked God to help him save his money. Kneeling beside his bed, he prayed, *“Dear Lord, please help me save my money for a new bike, and please, Lord, don’t let the ice cream man come down the street again tomorrow.”*

Underwood asks us to look at the 23rd Psalm when reflecting on these words in The Lord’s Prayer. Where are we asking God to lead us? Underwood writes, *“When I ask God to ‘lead us not into temptation,’ I often think of the Twenty-third Psalm...This is an extraordinary image of the Lord **leading us** beside still waters, **leading us** in the paths of righteousness, **leading us** through times when we are surrounded by enemies, **leading us** gracefully to our final moments on earth.”*

Pray that God would lead you not into temptation but keep you on a path that will help you steer clear of the things that would tempt you away from what is right and good and just and lovely and pure. Pray that God would lead you beside *“still waters,”* on *“paths of righteousness,”* through difficult times, and most of all, God would lead you to a deeper and more intimate relationship with Him and His will for your life.

***“For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever.”***

This final phrase of The Lord’s Prayer is not found in most translations of Matthew’s Gospel and was not part of the original text. It was added to the prayer by some of the early Christian community. Known as the Doxology, it is first found in the Didache (known as The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), an early Christian treatise.

Underwood writes, “*I have come to the conclusion that, for those who pray it, the doxology is a perfect way of concluding the prayer. It effectively closes the circle begun with the opening phrase. Recall that ‘Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name’ begins the prayer by acknowledging the transcendence of God. It places us on our knees as supplicants before a creator God who is bigger than we can imagine, and we take our rightful place as those who make humble entreaty to God. This tone sets the relationship that characterizes the rest of the prayer, and the doxology reinforces it...it reinforces the fact that the prayer isn’t about me but about God. It’s not **my** kingdom but **God’s** kingdom, not **my** power but **God’s** power, not **my** glory but **God’s** glory. It all belongs to God.*”

*“Our Father in heaven,  
 hallowed be your name,  
 your kingdom come,  
 your will be done,  
 on earth as it is in heaven.  
 Give us today our daily bread...  
 And forgive us our trespasses,  
 As we forgive those who trespass against us.  
 And lead us not into temptation,  
 But deliver us from evil.  
 For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever.  
 Amen.”*

When we pray those words...let it not simply be from memory...let it not be mechanical...but let us think about each word we pray, each phrase we lift up...let us acknowledge what we are proclaiming, what we are committing to, what we are stating we believe...let us pray the words Jesus taught us with all our mind and all our heart and all our soul.