

Forgiving and Being Forgiven¹

Our text today is from the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." What I'd like to ponder today is one little word in that profound sentence. It's the hardest word. And it's the most Christian word. The word is "as." As we forgive our debtors.

A couple of weeks ago I said that Jesus' Lord's Prayer is clearly based on a popular Jewish prayer, the Eighteen Benedictions. I'm saying "based on" but with critical and particularly Christian changes. In that Jewish prayer the petition runs: "Forgive us our Father, for we have sinned; pardon us our king, for we have offended; you are pleased to forgive and to pardon."

Well and good. But there's no "as." Jesus adds the activity in our lives that needs to be going on if we are going to be receiving God's forgiveness. That activity is a lifestyle of making amends, apologizing when necessary, and patching up relationships. In Jesus' mind, God's forgiveness of us is wrapped up in our forgiveness of others. "...As we forgive our debtors."

Here's a hard truth. Christians tend to miss the "as." Notice that immediately following the ending of the prayer, the text doubles back to the theme of forgiveness. It feels to me

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as if Jesus is saying: "I really mean the part about you forgiving. Your forgiveness by me hinges on you being willing to let others off the hook, and getting yourself off the hook.

Here's an example of Christians missing the "as." The tiny African nation of Rwanda has been celebrated as the crown jewel of Christianity in Africa. Carried in by missionaries, especially in the 1930's, Christian belief and baptisms have spread to 80% of the Rwandan populace. Then, in those fateful weeks in 1994, Rwandans—mostly Christians—took up guns and machetes—and slaughtered one another in blind hatred along the fault line of two ethnic identities—the Tutsis and the Hutus. The slaughter left over 800,000 dead. It was a killing spree that took over five lives a minute for 100 days.

Clearly, someone missed the "as." Christians who had been evangelized by the good news of God's forgiveness of them weren't informed or able to carry that forward as Jesus asks. Now, I know there were a few heroic exceptions. But somehow when the killing started, the Rwandans remembered their tribe first and their faith somewhere down the line.

Actually, it's doggone hard to pay attention to and carry out the "as." There's logic and a seeming sophistication about refusing to forgive and putting our foot down. Anger feels right. It feels principled. Forgiveness feels wrong sometimes.

Exactly three years ago in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania—deep in Amish country—twenty-five children were studying in a quaint one-room schoolhouse—a school with a bell. I'm guessing that you already know this story. Charles Carl Roberts IV, a milkman, burst into the school and molested and murdered ten of the girls in the classroom. If I fully described Roberts' brutality, this sermon would never resume its thought about forgiveness. At any rate, in the end, Roberts turned the gun on himself.

We hear such news and we wish that someone would have driven a tank into that school and blasted Charles Carl Roberts into vapor. That's what I scream at the television. That's not what happened. Instead, the entire Amish community immediately and unconditionally forgave Charles Roberts and reached out to his wife. Do you remember the news footage of the picturesque line of black buggies lined up along the highway? That was to attend Charles Roberts' funeral! The Amish invited his widow to come to their own children's funerals. Amish church leaders stipulated that memorial monies be divided with Charles Roberts' widow.

I could have told you a true and sweet story of how a dying mother threw away some contentious letters that her son had written in haste over the years. But I tell the Amish

schoolhouse story because it is so ghastly. I read about the forgiveness in Pennsylvania and I thought immediately how naïve those oddly dressed Amish must be.

But today I'm thinking that the Amish are the ones who just may understand the "as" better than I ever will. They just may understand the mind of Jesus who himself begged God to forgive his executioners even as they brutalized him. We're talking about strong and holy stuff when we talk about forgiveness and we're going to the core of God's mission to this broken planet in Jesus.

Human culture—ours included—lifts up the virtue of answering wrong with a payback. Our political parties quietly inflict damage on one another. Betrayals or victories are answered by payback. Our celebrities like Rosie and Donald Trump or Bill O'Reily and Keith Olbermann exchange nasty barbs. Divorced couples keep fighting each other by manipulating support payments and child visitation. Evening the score seems like the way the world gets better. If a business mistreats you, it seems irresponsible to not demand correction.

Unfortunately, creating a better world by smashing back is an illusion. Wrong answered by wrong begets more wrong. How did Gandhi say it? "Eye for an eye and the whole world is blind." Or Hannah Arendt. She observed that, carried to its

logical conclusion, retaliation unchecked breaks up the whole of civilization.

God has a better plan. It's difficult and humbling, it takes a measure of grace. It's the path of reconciliation. Jesus' whole ministry was described by Paul as reconciliation. Instead of retaliating our way to fairness, Jesus' plan is to forgive our way to unity. This is the kingdom plan for the end of time.

You might remember that stunning scene at the end of Sally Fields' classic movie, "Places of the Heart." Set in rural depression-era Texas, the movie begins with the accidental death of Sally Fields husband by a drunken gunman. One problem leads to the next, and soon the entire town's foibles and wickedness are exposed. But there's a powerful scene at the end. During the passing of the elements in a communion service, it becomes clear that healing has taken place. Gunman sits next to his victim; wife and philandering husband are together, banker and his debtor share in the cup and bread.

What's it mean? To me it means that somehow under the power of Jesus' forgiveness extending to and through each person, there is peace and fairness at last.

This is where this touches each of us. What God is offering to each of us and what he is calling forth in each of

us is a personal ceasefire, disarmament, and embrace. Someday we'll all sit at a heavenly banquet—together. With your "ex;" with the boss who unfairly fired you; with the girl in your wedding who was a friend until a certain argument took her out of your life—you'll someday sit down with all of them, and with Jesus. The child born Christian and the child born Muslim, somehow through the amazing grace that flows from Jesus' sacrifice, they will sit down together friends and with Jesus. The Tutsi and the Hutu, Rosie and Donald, the Amish mother and Charles Roberts. There'll be a great reunion.

And the key that unlocks this scene is the "as." As we forgive our debtors. To forgive is to say, "Yes, Lord, I'm ready to receive your grace and reconciliation and to be close to you again and to be close to each of your children, and to be a part of building the wonderful world at last, that is what you always had in mind.