

...Like Jesus 1-4-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Matthew 6:5-15

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

"Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. 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.

I remember those four little words that I used to torture my parents with whenever we went on a trip of any distance. "Are we there, yet?" Well, we are here. We've been talking about transition and change at First Christian Church since September. We've celebrated 25 wonderful years of ministry with David Digby. We've

said good-bye to an era and sent off David and Meg with our best wishes and prayers for their new journey. And here we are, gathered together, the first Sunday in the new year, in worship, anticipating what new thing God is doing in our midst.

So, here we are. But you might ask, "Where is here?" For you see, faith is not a destination. It is a journey; a journey we are on together; a journey that is an adventure that will take us places we desire to go as well as places we never imagined. You can bet there will be surprises and joys and complications and trial and error and misunderstanding and heartfelt gratitude and grace. And I am so delighted to be on this journey with you. God has been with this congregation through the years and through changes of leadership and growing in faith and changes in society and economic crises. God has called out leaders and called home saints. God has guided and embraced and challenged and been faithful through every stage in the life of this congregation. And God will continue to lead us as we go

forward into an unknown future in this fast-paced and ever-changing world.

When you're on a journey it is important to have a compass with you, or to update that metaphor, a *Global Positioning System* or *GPS*. On our faith journey, that compass or *GPS*, is Jesus. That is what it means to say Jesus is Savior or Lord. It means your life, and my life, and our life together is based on the direction of Jesus. And so, as we stand on the threshold of a new beginning at First Christian Church, it is fitting to listen to our guide and map our course based on what we hear.

As I was thinking about what might be a good series to begin the new year and this new chapter at First Christian, I thought about the various teachings of Jesus. I thought about how he got up before his home synagogue and proclaimed that the kingdom had come. I thought about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount with the beatitudes and turning the other cheek and loving enemies and seeking first the kingdom of God. That is all great stuff! Then I thought about the section of Jesus'

sermon where he talks about prayer and teaches what we call, "The Lord's Prayer."

That prayer, the Lord's Prayer, the prayer of Jesus, is both a ground and a guide on the journey of faith. It says much about Jesus' understanding of God and God's desire to be in relationship with us. If you grew up in the church, it's possible that those words may be so familiar that their meaning has been lost or forgotten or overlooked. It's also possible to get tripped up on the precise words and miss the amazing meaning and transformative power behind the words.

The prayer Jesus taught is a bold prayer. It is a prayer that leads us to put our trust in God rather than in the securities and crutches of this world. It is a prayer that, if it truly becomes a part of who we are, has the effect of bending our wants toward what God wants. It is a prayer that shapes us according to the values of God's kingdom and invites our participation in that kingdom. But the power of this prayer is in taking in and integrating the message, the values, the way of being to which the pray points. The power of this prayer is in

allowing our lives to be changed and our relationship to God deepened as we understand and live out of the desires and dreams of God.

The power of Jesus' prayer stands in contrast to other prayers we read or hear. I remember a scene from the movie, *The End*, when Burt Reynolds' character is diagnosed with cancer. He decides to end his life rather than suffer through the cancer. So, he goes to the ocean and swims out farther and farther from shore. The farther he gets, the more he realizes what a dumb idea it was to take his life. And so he begins to pray to God. "Please God... if you get me safely back to shore, I promise I'll stop drinking and running around with women... and I'll go to church every Sunday." And he starts back toward shore. The closer he gets to shore, the shorter his prayer. "Please God... if you get me safely back to shore, I promise I'll stop drinking and I'll go to church twice a month." "Please God... if you get me safely back to shore, I promise I'll go to church once in a while." "Please God... if you get me safely back to shore, I promise I'll go to

church on Christmas and Easter." Finally, he pulls himself out of the water and simply says, "Thanks, I appreciate it."

That is a great example of not understanding what prayer is all about. Burt Reynolds' character thought prayer was about changing God. Jesus knows prayer is about changing the pray-er. Burt Reynolds' character thought prayer was a way to save himself. Jesus knows prayer is about saving the world. Burt Reynolds' character thought prayer was about "my will be done." Jesus knows that prayer is about "God's will be done."

In their book on the Lord's Prayer, authors Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon write, "This book is shaped by the Lord's Prayer because the prayer is a mark of the journey called Christian. The prayer names the danger you will face as well as providing the help - the necessary skills - you will need for negotiating the dangers of the journey. Christianity means conflict. We never forget, as we pray, that the one who taught us to pray in this way was crucified. We pray

like this because, in Jesus of Nazareth, God has intruded among us in a spectacularly weird and peculiarly wonderful way."

We live in challenging times... a shrinking economy, loss of jobs, a global environmental crisis, religious strife, war, poverty, and the list goes on. As those whose guide is Jesus, we need to get our bearings so we can help steer things in a way to bring God's healing and wholeness to the world. These times call for a renewal of faith and a commitment to follow where Jesus leads. We need bold words and thoughts and action to bring hope and rebirth. These times call for praying like Jesus.

Each Sunday from January 18th through the end of February the worship will focus on a word or phrase from the prayer Jesus taught. Jesus invites us to be part of what God is doing. Jesus invites us to pray in that peculiar way that makes all things new. This is a day of new beginnings. God is creating and recreating, bringing healing and hope to a weary world. Our God is making all things new. Amen.

Our Father 1-18-09
By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Have you ever experienced anything like the pray-er in the drama? There you are, praying, maybe even the Lord's Prayer, and suddenly God starts talking back. Your concentration is broken. Your feelings take flight. You find your way back to prayer, but then it happens again. The words of your prayer seem to be triggering something inside. Flashes of thought. Eruptions of feeling. Responses from deep within. Is it the Spirit - God - talking back to you, questioning you, pushing you, causing you to reflect in new ways? By the time you finish the prayer, you are a different person than when you started.

Prayer has that kind of power; the power to change us; to alter our thoughts and our feelings. Prayer can have a way of bending our will, our desires, in the direction of God. Prayer is not about changing God, but about God changing us. It is not about getting ourselves out

of a pinch, but about empowering us to act on God's behalf. Prayer is not about my will be done, but about God's will be done.

In his sermon on the mount, Jesus taught about prayer... the kind that is pleasing to God. It need not be showy or full of big impressive words. It isn't something to use to win brownie points. Rather, Jesus says to pray like this, "Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, 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." (Matt. 6:9-13) This simple prayer is the kind of prayer that is pleasing to God. This simple prayer, if taken seriously, if prayed continually by Christians near and far, has the power to change the world.

Each week between now and the end of February, we will take a word or phrase from this prayer of Jesus and have that as our focus in worship. But let me ask you to do something for the next six weeks. Would each of you make a commitment to pray the Lord's prayer each

day? Maybe you can pray it as you rise or before you go to bed. Maybe at the dinner table with your spouse or family. If you like to sing, maybe you could sing it in the shower or while you work. Don't feel like you have to limit yourself. Pray it as often as you like, but at least once a day. Let's try that and see what happens. Okay?

Today we reflect upon the address in Jesus' prayer. When we pray, presumably we are praying to someone. Jesus suggests, "Our Father". That sounds pretty normal to us. We've probably heard God addressed as "Father" all or most of our lives if we grew up in the church, and maybe even if we didn't. But I want to suggest that Jesus was making an important theological shift in using these two words - OUR FATHER.

Biblical commentators note that the first important point Jesus was making, and to many, the most difficult is in the word "our." Jesus did not use the word "my." God is not possessive; not my, but our. From the first word of this prayer, we must acknowledge that we are connected as family to all other people. Just like the line from the

hymn, "with God as our father, brothers all are we" or in updated language, "we are family."

If God is OUR father, that makes us brothers and sisters to one another. In I Peter we read, "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people." This is a big prayer in that it takes us outside our small world and opens it up. OUR father brings us together into community with one another. And that means I am a brother or sister to people I don't like, and people I don't know, and people I don't agree with, and people I call enemy. And as I pray OUR father, my world expands and my care and concern widen, and my perspective of God enlarges. Jesus was criticized for hanging out with the wrong people. But in the language of OUR father, there are no wrong people. We are all children of God.

That little word, OUR, makes a big difference! Jesus did not call isolated individuals to follow him. He called a group of disciples and he gathered a crowd. Christianity is inherently communal and we talk about the church as the body of Christ. This communal call is integral

to the Christian life. As we pray together, correct one another, forgive one another, care for one another, and stumble along together, we experience the saving grace of Jesus and, together, make the way of Jesus our way. We simply couldn't do it alone. We are all in this together. And it's all right there in the first word of the Lord's Prayer - OUR.

Our Father. William Barclay told the story of an emperor riding through Rome at the head of his legions. His son, excited to see his father, burrowed through the crowd and under the legs of a guard in order to run to his father's chariot. The guard scooped him up and said, "Don't you know who that is in the chariot? That's the emperor." The boy replied, "He may be your emperor, but he's my father." In using the image of father, Jesus was showing a side of God that needed to be experienced.

God was feared and remote. God's name couldn't even be spoken. To see God's face was to risk death. God's power and glory were too much for mere mortals to behold. And here Jesus comes along and

calls *God*, *Abba*, *father*, or more accurately, *daddy*. Jesus' language in the address of this prayer is one of intimacy and love. *God* is approachable and loves us more than we can ever know. That love is like that of a parent in that it is unconditional. There is nothing we can do to make *God* stop loving us and desiring to be in relationship with us.

In calling *God* father, Jesus was using a metaphor that would evoke images of love and intimacy and connectedness to counter the more majestic and unapproachable images that were already in people's heads. Jesus' use of the word *Father* to describe was a way of opening up and expanding our understanding of *God*. But one word or image cannot contain *God*. As James Mulholland writes, "Those who vehemently argue for the title "God the Father" miss the point. Jesus was not interested in replacing one rigid title with another. He was defining our relationship to *God* in a new way. Claiming *God* as a parent was far more than sentimental fantasy. In so doing, Jesus was challenging how we perceive *God*. For Jesus, *God* was the father we cry out for when we awake in the darkness, in the grip of a nightmare.

God was the mother who dries our tears and kisses away our pain when we fall and skin our knee. God was a parent - intimate, loving, committed." (Praying Like Jesus, p.34)

When we pray, "Our Father..." we stand with sisters and brothers of a loving God who brought forth life, who gave us breath, who continues to bless us and call us by name. When we pray, "Our Father..." we are united in our dedication to the family business of love and compassion and justice, bringing the hope that is ours in Christ to the world. Brothers and sisters, children of God, God in Christ brings us together and makes us one family. May we be a loving, giving, faithful family. Amen.

Your Kingdom Come 1-25-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Matthew 6:25-33 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 25:34-36 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

God in Christ is creating something new. The old is passing away. The very Spirit of God is moving in and through us bringing hope, healing wounds, tearing down walls, warming cold hearts, building relationships based on love and compassion. Jesus came to usher in a new kingdom, a new way of being, a new way of exercising power and a new way to measure success. Jesus spent his whole adult life trying to teach and demonstrate this new way of being. And so here, right after the address of his prayer, right after "Our Father," Jesus offers these grand words for us to repeat. "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That is one bold statement! And a dangerous one at that.

Remember the context in which Jesus lived and taught. It was in the midst of the Roman Empire. And in that empire, the Emperor was thought to be the bringer of peace and tranquility. The Emperor was thought to be the son of god and Lord of the people. And the Emperor brought about this peace and order through the use of sword and a social system with some on the bottom and others on the top... some slaves and others masters... some considered better than others with a strict class system and fear and violence as a primary means of social control. And along comes Jesus and teaches people to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That was treason. That was revolutionary. That is what landed Jesus on a Roman cross. If Jesus had simply been teaching personal piety, he wouldn't have been a threat. But Jesus came to help usher in a different power structure and a different rule - God's rule of love, mercy, grace and justice. And he began by teaching his followers to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That is a bold prayer, indeed!

It is important to understand that this is a big prayer... the prayer Jesus taught. It begins, as we focused on last week, with "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." It begins with the recognition that the God we address is not one among many gods, but the one God whose children we all are. Ours is a big God, great and holy. And this loving God has a big vision for creation... all of creation. If God is in charge, things are different, better, hopeful. This is not about the person praying, but about God's desire for us as members of one family... the family of God which includes all of us, no exclusions.

Okay, so there are two concepts here to unpack a bit. First is "Your kingdom come." There is a reason this comes first. Jesus came preaching that the kingdom of God was here and near and within reach. In our scripture this morning, Jesus tells the disciples to seek first the kingdom of God... don't get bogged down worrying about what you are going to eat and drink and wear. That will come. Rather, understand and look for and participate in God's kingdom.

How do we do that? Well, that's what Jesus' ministry was all about. He told story after story, "the kingdom of God is like...blessed are those... for theirs is the kingdom..." The point is always that the kingdom of God is not like the kingdoms of this world. In God's kingdom grace rather than works prevail; love rather than legalism is the rule; there is concern about those who have been ignored or discounted or oppressed by the kingdoms of this world. In God's kingdom all are included and all have a place, tax-collectors, sinners, prostitutes and religious leaders alike. In God's kingdom the hungry are fed and the naked clothed and the prisoners visited and the sick cared for, the strangers are welcomed, the lost are found, the last are first and the least are greatest. So when we pray, "Your kingdom come," we, like Jesus, are asking for trouble. We are asking for change. We are putting aside our selfishness and pride and fear. We are opening ourselves to a big view of the world and a vision that brings hope and healing. And we are putting our trust and faith in God's ways over some of the ways we have learned.

"Your will be done." Notice that follows "Your kingdom come." In order to discern God's will, we need to understand God's kingdom. It's kind of like you're going on a journey and you need directions. Well, if you don't know your destination it is nearly impossible to get directions. God's kingdom is like the destination. God's will is the way to get there. But like most journeys, there is more than one way to get to where you want to go. Some ways are better than others, but the important thing is to be on the journey heading in the right direction. A young man asked his father what he should do. "Should I be an actor, a writer, a counselor, or a teacher?" The father answered, "I'm not concerned about what you do. I care about who you become." That's caring about the destination more than the route to get there. God's will is absolutely connected to God's kingdom. It's not about God's personal will for me or you. It's about how I, we, can fit into God's will to establish the kingdom.

The kingdom of God is not something external that we await. It is within us, waiting to be born on earth as it is in heaven. When we

pray "Your kingdom come," we are not making a request. We are not asking to sit around and do nothing until God finally acts. When we pray, "Your kingdom come," We're taking a vow. We are pledging our willingness to allow God's kingdom to be established in and through us in large and small ways. We are opening ourselves to be changed and challenged and moved to action to make real God's kingdom on earth... to be an answer to prayer.

Last week I asked those gathered in worship to pray Jesus' prayer every day. No matter what time of day or where you are, no matter whether you pray it out loud or silently, speaking or singing, just pray it. How'd you do? Did you remember? How did it feel? Did it change you in any way? Did you notice anything you hadn't before? I found myself praying it as I drifted off to sleep or as I awoke. And I found the words, "Your kingdom come" echoing in my mind throughout the week, ringing in my head as a call to action.

I've often wondered what positive, miraculous change would happen in the world if all Christians prayed this prayer every day. And

not just as a legalistic thing you do because you think you should, but a real, authentic prayer where you truly let down your defenses and open yourself to God. Do you realize that there are somewhere around 2 BILLION Christians in the world. 2 BILLION! Can you imagine the possibilities if we all took up praying Jesus' prayer on a daily basis? Assuming God uses the prayer to transform people's lives and energize them to do the work of the kingdom - to take on hunger and poverty and hatred and injustice - the world would be a much better place for all people. And God's kingdom would break out here and there and it would be contagious and spread like we've never seen before. And maybe, just maybe, it would finally come, in its fullness, on earth as in heaven. Can you just imagine?!

Play "If Everyone Cared" by Nickelback

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vir-IaJoQZc>

Lead Us... Deliver Us 2-15-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Mark 8:34-9:1

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has

Lead Us

Since the beginning of the year, we have been working our way through the prayer that Jesus taught... the prayer we call, "The Lord's Prayer." Today we come almost to the end. "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," is the phrase we will consider today. And let's face it, we really do need some good leadership in these times when there is so much temptation. When we pray "lead us," we are acknowledging our need for guidance and direction. We are admitting that we need help and that we don't have all the answers,

that we are vulnerable to the various things in life that can take us off course. And so Jesus puts those words in the prayer he taught, "lead us."

Temptation abounds, doesn't it? Even Jesus was tempted, remember, out there in the wilderness, "you can have all the power and all the wealth and all the glamour, Jesus, if you only worship me," is the voice of Jesus' tempter. Maybe his memory of that experience inspired him to put this part in his prayer. Temptation is all around us. It tells us, "if only"... fill in the blank, you will be happy, wealthy, fulfilled, and so on. But it is never the case. Because filling in the blank with material wealth and success and awards is not what brings the kind of life about which Jesus spoke.

Do you remember the televangelist, Jim Bakker, with Praise the Lord ministries? He was one who probably began with strong faith and good intentions. But the lure of fame and wealth and success blinded him to the gospel truth and took him down a path that led to his own demise and imprisonment after the revelation of both sex scandals and

accounting fraud. In prison, Bakker had a lot of time to reflect and to study the Bible, especially the life and teachings of Jesus who he had claimed to follow. In his book, I Was Wrong, Bakker said, "To my surprise, after months of studying Jesus, I concluded that he did not have one good thing to say about money." In fact, Jesus thought money the most tempting alternative to God. Once Jim Bakker had been stripped of all he held dear, he was left with the ugly truth that he had worshiped an idol even as he claimed to worship God.

"In retrospect," wrote Bakker, "one of the main reasons I slipped into believing and preaching a distorted doctrine was because of my lack of understanding of what it really means to allow Jesus to be Lord of your life. I had accepted Jesus as my Savior and with my lips I had called Him 'Lord,' but in my heart and lifestyle, I now realized that He was not Lord of my life; I was."

Choir: Wade In the Water

Deliver Us

We find ourselves in situations where we need help. We need deliverance. We need to see a way out of trouble or oppression or evil of one kind or another, whether from an outside source or inside us - as in we can be our own worst enemy. The Israelites in slavery in Egypt cried out for deliverance. They were tired of the heavy yoke they carried doing the bidding of the Egyptian powers. And God called up leaders from among them - Moses and Aaron and Miriam - to lead them out of the land of oppression and to a promised land - a land flowing with milk and honey. But while that sounds good, there was much pain and struggle and conflict in the move of deliverance. For one thing, the ways of slavery were the familiar ways. They may not have been ideal, but they were what the people knew - what to expect, how to behave, how to succeed in their small way within that setting.

Jesus knew the lure of complacency and adaptation. He understood the power of "the way it is" to keep people from what could be or what God would like to see. And so he taught us to pray, "deliver

us." In that prayer there is acknowledgement that we need help; that we are in trouble whether from forces around us or within. We need to move from where we are to where God wants us to be. And that requires a journey. Deliver us, God. Take us from where we are and lead us to a better place where we have our priorities straight and where we can live as your children in your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. But the thing is, we've got to go on a journey. We've got to be willing to follow if we are to be delivered. That is the thing about being a Christian. It is all about the journey, not the destination. It is about leaving behind and picking up and following.

Choir: Wade In the Water

Wade On In

So here's the paradox. If you want to save your life, you must be willing to lose it. For in giving up, in letting go, in setting aside our own agendas and following Jesus, we find life abundant. Jesus, you see, was not all that interested in people "believing" in him, at least not in the way we often think. Jesus IS interested in people following him -

taking his life and teachings and healing and example into oneself so that Jesus' way becomes our own. It is about living and being willing to go on the journey wherever it leads, trusting that you will indeed find and share abundant life here in this world. Christians were first known as "followers of the Way..." not believers of certain doctrine. John records Jesus saying "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." If Jesus is the way, then we follow in the same way Jesus leads and in so doing, we do have crosses to bear, but so do we discover life.

So the paradox of Jesus' teaching us to pray, "lead us... deliver us," is that in both cases it requires us laying down the barriers and the assumptions and the burdens and the excuses, and following. The Israelites would still be in Egypt today if they had not left what was familiar and followed, trusting God to deliver, trusting the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey, not as some easy fix or answer, but as a journey of faith... or you might say a leap of faith.

We are on a journey of faith. We are called to follow Jesus, wherever Jesus leads, trusting in the goodness and grace of God to see

us through. We stand on the edge, looking down, and there is a voice that calls to us, "wade on in."

Play "Leap of Faith" from Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-c8_OFwZoY

AMEN! 2-22-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Revelation 7:11,12 And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing,
"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Since the beginning of the year, we have been focusing on the prayer that Jesus taught; the prayer we call "The Lord's Prayer." We began by looking at the context in which Jesus taught this prayer. Praying, says Jesus, is about the heart, not show... about what's inside, not an ornament to make a person look good. Prayer, in its truest form, is about changing us as we pray, about bending our hearts and minds and will to God rather than trying to get God to do our bidding. So, Jesus invites us to pray in this manner beginning by addressing a God who loves us like a parent; a God who knows us and with whom we can be in close relationship; a God whose children we all are which

makes us family to one another and heirs to the family business which is love, compassion, justice, healing, forgiveness and grace.

This prayer that Jesus taught puts first things first and so it begins by acknowledging that God's plan and purposes are what really matter, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." As we pray those words, we take that mission inside us and become part of the answer to our prayer as we work with God to make God's kingdom real in our living and in our loving. Once we are part of God's big picture thinking, then we ask that we have what we need in order to be strong servants of God... "give us this day our daily bread."

Then comes the difficult part of asking for something else we need in order to be strong servants of God... forgiveness, and in order to truly receive forgiveness from God, we must understand, and offer forgiveness to others. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." As we seek to be faithful to God's purposes, we need a couple of other things as well, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." God sent Jesus, the one teaching us how to pray, in

order to show us the way. But we must be willing to let go of our fears and preconceived notions and barriers so that we can take the leap of faith required to follow where Jesus leads us.

And now we come to the end of Jesus' prayer... "For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. AMEN." We end with an acknowledgement that it is in God's hands. We will work with God to bring about God's kingdom. We will do our best to be partners in healing and loving and forgiving and justice-making and giving, but in the end, we must trust that it is ultimately in God's hands. "For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. AMEN."

Author Elie Wiesel, tells the story of what happens to a young man in a concentration camp. When he arrives there, he is about to give up. He sees an elder run toward the fence who is shot by the Nazis. The young man thinks to himself that he will do the same thing. But an elder comes along, grabs him by the shoulders and says, "Wait a minute! Don't do that." The young man says, "Well, why shouldn't I?"

To which the elder replies, "You need to see how this thing is going to end."

Weisel says there were three types of people who were unable to make it out of the concentration camp:

The first is the optimist. They never make it out. They say, "We are going to be delivered on Hanukkah." Hanukkah comes and they are not delivered. So the optimist says, "We are going to be delivered in the Jewish New Year." The Jewish New Year comes and they are not delivered. So the optimist dies of a broken heart.

Another type of person is the cynic. The cynic says, "We are never going to be delivered!" The cynic gives up before God actually shows. They say, "There is no God. Nothing is going to happen. We are going to stay in this concentration camp!" And so the cynic gives up, refusing to engage the evil around them.

There was another type, however, the realist. The realists share their faith in a different way. In the barracks of the concentration camp they say, "Well, I don't know when we will be delivered, but I do know

we serve a God who will deliver us." Or, in the words of the African American tradition, "God might not show up when you want, but God is always right on time." We must have the courage to hope. That is the perspective of the words, "For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. AMEN!"

Rev. Otis Moss III, pastor of The Historic Tabernacle Baptist Church in Augusta, GA tells of the time when he was young and watching a movie called The Guns of Navarone starring Gregory Peck with his mother and father. None of them had seen the movie before and as they came to the end of the film it looked like Gregory Peck's character was going to die. Otis looked at his mother who was nervous and pacing. Otis, himself was biting his nails. But his father was just sitting there, cool, calm, collected. He wondered to himself how his father could stay so calm.

As the film grew in intensity and it looked dyer, Otis' mother said, "I can't take it anymore," and left the room. Otis sat there, nervous while his father continued to be cool, calm and collected.

Finally Otis had to ask his father, "Pop, why is it that Mom left the room and how is it that I'm so nervous and here you are cool, calm, collected?" His father looked at him, smiled, and simply said, "Son, I read the book! I know how this thing is going to end."

"For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. AMEN!" Amen does not mean the same as "The End" after a story. It doesn't mean it's over. Amen means, "so be it." To say amen is to affirm what has been said, to give consent, to go along with, to agree. It is not something to be said without thinking. In fact, in the Hebrew tradition, there were rules that you should not say amen if you did not hear what came before it. How can you affirm what you have not heard?

When we say amen after the prayer Jesus taught, we are saying, "Yes!" or "I do" or "I will." It is like a vow. I give myself to you, God, as part of an answer to this prayer Jesus taught us to say. I give myself to your will, your kingdom, forgiveness, following the way of Jesus, understanding that I am not ultimately in control, you are, God...

Amen is a way to give ourselves to the truth of this prayer that tells us to whom we belong, where we are moving, who we really are and what true kingdom, power, and glory look like. In the third chapter of Revelation, we read, "The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation..." In this line Jesus is called the "Amen." Through Jesus we have the courage to hope because we have that faithful witness who leads us and teaches us and strengthens us and helps our vision stay focused on God's great purposes.

In the African American church there is the practice of saying "Amen" during the sermon or a prayer or song as a way of making the words one's own. Actually, I've heard some preachers say, "can I have an AMEN" if they don't think people are paying attention, or maybe to see if they are awake. Amen can be "just what we do" or it can be a powerful response to what God is doing. "For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." Can I have an AMEN?!

Forgive Us 2-8-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Rain Come Down by Shawn Kirchner - Come, rain, come down; come, rain, come down; Heaven's tears of mercy, come a runnin' down. Say no words, it is too soon, say no words out loud. But wrap your quiet arms around, hide us in your cloud. Come, rain, come down; come, rain, come down; Heaven's tears of mercy, come a runnin' down. Come wash away this awful stain and let this place be clean. And bring the fairest flow'rs to meet the evil we have seen. Come, rain, come down; come, rain, come down; Heaven's tears of mercy, come a runnin' down. A little lower than the angels we were born to be, yet which of all the creatures knows this misery? Come, rain, come down; come, rain, come down; Heaven's tears of mercy, come a runnin' down.

Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

"Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors."

Today we come to what is probably the most challenging part of Jesus' prayer. Now it's getting personal. It is one thing to invite God's will be done or to ask for daily sustenance. It is another thing to ask for forgiveness from God in the same manner in which we forgive. I'm not sure we would have composed the prayer quite like that. I mean yes, we do ask God's forgiveness. We know we need it. But why does that mean we must forgive? Surely that's different.

But the truth is, forgiveness is foundational to faith. Forgiveness is a pillar of following Jesus. For in forgiveness, the power of darkness is broken and the possibility for healing and wholeness becomes real. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. [One] who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies."

There are many, many extraordinary, inspiring stories of forgiveness against all odds and the power of forgiveness to bring forth the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. So, rather than talk about forgiveness today, I decided to share two such stories.

The first is the story of the composer of "Rain Come Down" - the piece that the choir sang earlier. I first met Shawn Kirchner when I was a counselor at church camp and he was a camper. It was the summer before I started seminary. Even then Shawn's musical gifts were very evident. Some years later, I invited Shawn back to be a counselor and then a dean of camp himself. I always said he had the gift of being able to make any group of people sound like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Shawn was one who very much inspired my own children musically. And Shawn, because of his faith, has used his gift of music to promote healing and understanding, peace and justice and reconciliation as long as I have known him.

On the sheet music for "Rain Come Down" - just underneath the title - it says, "written in response to the shooting tragedy at

Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999." What a powerful, grace-filled response to a senseless tragedy. What it doesn't say, though, is that just 11 months before the terrible tragedy at Columbine, Shawn experienced on a personal level, the terror of random, senseless violence. You see, Shawn's mother was out jogging early one morning when she was assaulted and murdered. So when he wrote, "Come wash away this awful stain and let this place be clean. And bring the fairest flow'rs to meet the evil we have seen," that prayer was surely his own and had probably been prayed so many times. The rain, the very tears of heaven come a runnin' down. God's grace and forgiveness come to meet our need and draw out love rather than hate and forgiveness that brings forth healing and new life. Through his music and his life, Shawn has been a witness to the triumph of love and grace, even in the midst of hatred and violence. He has used the experience of pain and suffering to bring life and hope. He has released the stranglehold of bitterness and resentment and despair that God's gracious love might rule his heart.

The second story I want to share with you comes from the classic novel, *Les Miserables*, by Victor Hugo. The scene involves two main characters, six silver plates and two silver candlesticks. The first character is the Bishop... a saintly man, absolutely devoted to the poor, who lives in a simple house, and is always open to strangers. The other character is Jean Valjean, who, at the age of twenty-five had broken a window and stolen a loaf of bread to feed his sister's seven starving children. As a result, he was sentenced to six years in prison, which, because of several escape attempts had extended to nineteen grueling years.

Jean Valjean, recently released from prison, a hardened and broken man, comes to the Bishop's door seeking food and shelter. The Bishop welcomes him and feeds him, setting the table with the only luxury items he possesses, a set of six silver dishes and two large silver candlesticks. That night, as Jean Valjean takes shelter in the Bishop's home, he wakes up, steals the six silver plates and runs away. The next morning the Bishop discovers his silver plates are missing and

Jean Valjean is gone. As he sits at the table, there is a knock at the door.

"Come in," said the Bishop.

The door opened. A singular and violent group made its appearance on the threshold. Three men were holding a fourth man by the collar. The three men were gendarmes; the other was Jean Valjean.

A brigadier of gendarmes, who seemed to be in command of the group, was standing near the door. He entered and advanced to the Bishop, making a military salute.

"Monseigneur—" said he.

At this word, Jean Valjean, who was dejected and seemed overwhelmed, raised his head with an air of stupefaction.

..., Monseigneur Bienvenu had advanced as quickly as his great age permitted.

"Ah! here you are!" he exclaimed, looking at Jean Valjean. "I am glad to see you. Well, but how is this? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest, and for which you can certainly get two hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?"

Jean Valjean opened his eyes wide, and stared at the venerable Bishop with an expression which no human tongue can render any account of.

"Monseigneur," said the brigadier of gendarmes, "so what this man said is true, then? We came across him. He was walking like a man who is running away. We stopped him to look into the matter. He had this silver—"

"And he told you," interposed the Bishop with a smile, "that it had been given to him by a kind old fellow of a priest with whom he had passed the night? I see how the matter stands. And you have brought him back here? It is a mistake."

"In that case," replied the brigadier, "we can let him go?"

"Certainly," replied the Bishop.

The gendarmes released Jean Valjean, who recoiled.

"Is it true that I am to be released?" he said, in an almost inarticulate voice, and as though he were talking in his sleep.

"Yes, thou art released; dost thou not understand?" said one of the gendarmes.

"My friend," resumed the Bishop, "before you go, here are your candlesticks. Take them."

He stepped to the chimney-piece, took the two silver candlesticks, and brought them to Jean Valjean...

Jean Valjean was trembling in every limb. He took the two candlesticks mechanically, and with a bewildered air.

"Now," said the Bishop, "go in peace. By the way, when you return, my friend, it is not necessary to pass through the garden. You can always enter and depart through the street door. It is never fastened with anything but a latch, either by day or by night."

Then, turning to the gendarmes:—

"You may retire, gentlemen."

The gendarmes retired.

Jean Valjean was like a man on the point of fainting.

The Bishop drew near to him, and said in a low voice:—

"Do not forget, never forget, that you have promised to use this money in becoming an honest man."

Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of ever having promised anything, remained speechless. The Bishop had emphasized the words when he uttered them. He resumed with solemnity:—

"Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God."

We all stand in need of forgiveness. We are all debtors in one way or another. And so Jesus' asks us to be honest about that as we pray and as we live in light of God's gracious love. And Jesus certainly practiced what he preached. As he hung on the cross - innocent of the crimes for which he was executed - Jesus, himself, prayed "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And so we pray, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" so that we may be transformed by God's grace and stand ready to forgive. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote, "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime. Therefore, we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history.

Therefore, we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; Therefore, we are saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness." Forgive us, O God, as we forgive. Amen.