

February 3, 2008

When You are Praying...

Matthew 6:7-15

And forgive us our debts as we forgive.

It's just not natural to even pray such a thing.

Natural is getting even.

Natural is seeking a balance. Justice is the balance we seek.

Natural is an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Not more. Not less.

We know how hard it is to forgive. We think back to something somebody did to us, some act of cruelty, some nasty thing, and even if it was years ago those memories come flooding in with a certain raising of the pulse and tightening of the mouth and narrowing of the eyes.

The pain they carry sometimes lives longer than the person who sinned against us.

The anger and bitterness sometimes corrode our sweet souls until we become the persons we hate. If we let it. If we never pray about it. If we cannot trust God to settle it.

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

What a thing to say!

You want God's forgiveness? Jesus says we must forgive those who cheat us, rob us, slander us, wound us. And if they did it not to us but to those we love it's just the same, maybe worse.

Hurt my child and I become protectively, insanely irrational in a heartbeat. What I want is revenge. Give me that eye for the eye you blinded. Don't talk to me about turning the other cheek, or walking the second mile, or giving up the shirt off my back as well as the coat which keeps me warm.

The rabbi said,

"The problem with you Christians is that you don't understand the stern impossibility of forgiveness."

He is right. We don't.

- We struggle to follow Jesus who taught us that we should **love** our enemies and not hate them.
- We chase after Jesus who said that we should **pray** for those who despitely use us and abuse us.
- We want to **be** like Jesus who prayed to God in the garden as the soldiers approached with spears and swords: "Let this cup pass from me. I don't want to die. Nevertheless, let it be **your** way, not my way."
- We **listen** to Jesus who hung from the cross of death, spikes driven through tender flesh, taunted by his executioners, who prayed: "Father, **forgive** them, they don't understand what they are doing."
- We think, after all is said and done, that *Jesus* is the **path**, that *Jesus* understands the **truth**, that *Jesus* shows the **way** to life abundant.

There is a sense in which it is not natural. We know that.

So how, we would ask Jesus, do we get on with forgiving?

We'd *like* to forgive. We'd like that very much. But we're not of such sturdy stuff as Jesus and it's difficult for us to lay aside the wound as if it didn't matter.

- We detest the way we feel when hate boils over.
- We wish we could simply forget the injury but we can't.

Sometimes the harm done to us becomes the most important thing.

It becomes our master. We become its slave.

Sometimes our hurt consumes our lives.

We plot revenge and pray destruction on those people who did us evil.

Nearly everybody knows the Lord's Prayer by heart.

We can say it in our sleep with our brains on autopilot.

But the very familiarity of it cloaks the difficult radicality of it.

That prickly prayer comforts us but it also confronts us.

God cares whether we forgive our enemies.

God cares about the compassion we show, the gratitude we exhibit, and the forgiveness we grant. It's a matter of soul.

There is a picture in the 23rd Psalm of a table set where blessing flows down like anointing oils and the cup of joy runs over. Who is there with us at that feast which *God* prepares for us? Our enemies!

Jesus told a story likening the kingdom of heaven to a banquet spread out with gold and glitter. When those who were invited didn't come the master sent out, compelling everybody from the alleyways and byways to come in, to eat together at the fellowship tables of grace. When *God's* will is done on earth as in heaven nobody goes hungry and nobody eats alone.

In *God's* kingdom:

- forgiveness is at the forefront and reconciliation is the result.
- Love is at the center and new life abounds like the thrill of a woman who finds her lost coins, like the happiness of a merchant who finds a rare and precious pearl, like the joy of a father whose long-lost son comes back home. Wow.

Following Jesus is life because he *is* the way.

He *understands* the truth.

He leads us, not toward some impossible perfection, but toward greater openness to the living *God* who calls us beyond our limited selves and narrow worlds.

We have to learn to forgive, no matter how difficult, because it's part of living in *God's* way. It doesn't mean we forget. It doesn't mean we pretend that we were never wronged. But it does mean that the sting of pain is gone and the memories are healed. We cannot do it by ourselves. *God* comes to our aid. *God* walks with us as we trudge through the valley of death.

God is love.

God is power.

God has power to fashion and form all things.

A God seen as power without love gives us 9/11 and Iraq.

A God seen as love without power gives empty, irrelevant religion.

The God of the resurrection of Jesus is powerful love in action - fashioning and forming a new world, compelling us forgiven sinners to come in and feast.

In that new world the lame walk. The blind see. The dead live. The hopeless leap up with joy.

In that new kingdom **God's** name is hallowed, not Caesar's.

God's will is done, not the empire's.

In that kingdom we trust God to provide for our needs.

We pray for our daily bread and remember manna given to hungry slaves marching through the wilderness to freedom.

We pray to not be brought to the time of trial and remember providence for the sparrow on the wing and the flower in the field.

We pray that God will forgive our debts even as we remember how we were sinners who were once far away who have been brought near by the forgiving love of Christ Jesus.

Maybe Jesus gave us the prayer because he wanted that life for us.

Of course we'll never get it on our own. We'll never make a world where scores are not counted, grievances are not harbored, spirits are not bound, and trespasses are not allowed to destroy relationships. But God can. *God does.* God is powerful love in action. The kingdom of God is at hand. Look. See it? It is near, very near. It is wherever two or three of us invite Christ into our midst, and pray. It is God's good pleasure to welcome us into the kingdom and to protect us from the evil one.

Will you pray with me the prayer Jesus gave when they asked him how to pray. Let's pray the version recorded in Matthew and printed on our bulletin cover. Let's not simply say it but pray it, slowly, softly, tenderly.

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.

Thank you. May God be praised in our prayer. Amen.