

## SOMETHING STRONGER, PLEASE

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August 2, 2009

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

### Matthew 6:9-14

When I was in my twenties, I used to look at a glass and see it as half empty. There was so much I hadn't gotten out of life yet. I wanted to do so much and accumulate a lot of stuff.

When I was in my forties, I began to see the glass as half full. I had done many of the things I wanted to and was beginning to realize that I had more than enough stuff, especially when it came time to move.

Now that I'm in my sixties, I definitely see that the glass is not only half full, it's brimming over. But sometimes, when I look at that glass, I just want to say, "Got anything stronger?"

That is how I see forgiveness—at least as far as my understanding of it in the Christian Tradition goes. The truth is, I need something stronger. Despite the fact that the word FORGIVE and its cognates are used 155 times in the Bible; despite the centrality and emphasis on forgiveness in The Lord's Prayer and so many of our teachings, and despite the importance of the practice of forgiving to our own personal health and the world's survival—DESPITE ALL OF THIS, I still need something stronger.

*And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

It was in seminary that I learned the difference between debts and trespasses and why Episcopalians use "trespass" and Presbyterians, "debts." It seems that when such things were decided, the Episcopalian owned all the land, and the Presbyterians, the banks.

But regardless of whether we use "debt" or "trespass," both appear to be conditional. We want God to forgive us as we forgive others, and if we don't forgive others, God won't forgive us.

*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father or Mother will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Mother or Father forgive your trespasses.*

Sounds like we'd better be awfully good at forgiving! And yet nowhere in the Bible, from the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis, where Abraham argues with God to forgive the righteous people of Sodom, to the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Luke, where Jesus, on the cross, cries, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are

doing,"—nowhere have I ever found anything that tells us exactly HOW to forgive. Exactly HOW do you move beyond the hurt, sadness, fear, anger, and grief that is the natural reaction to something you see as an injustice to you or someone you care about?

Recently Dave and I attended a two-day workshop on the psychology of forgiveness led by Dr. Frederic Luskin, author of *Forgive for Good* and other books. Luskin heads the Stanford Forgiveness Project, which, among other things, has conducted the largest controlled forgiveness intervention study to date. Over the years, Luskin and his colleagues have developed a step-by-step process that has helped thousands of people move past their grievance stories to healing practices that have enabled them to get on with their lives, including mothers who lost sons to violence in Northern Ireland.

*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

If you're like me, you may have merged Christ's teaching to turn the other cheek with forgiving. If you're like me, you may have developed an understanding of forgiveness that equates forgiving with forgetting. And, if you're like me, you may have found the state of forgiveness nearly impossible to attain—much less, maintain.

Every time I see the forgiveness bus coming down the road at me, I think, well, I know I should get on, but I'm not sure I'm ready to leave the place where I am yet. So I'll just wait for the next one. Pretty soon, all these buses have gone by and I'm just standing there. Okay, I say. Next time for sure. And I do. I get on, but then I find myself getting off at the very next stop. Next thing I know I'm beating myself up for failing to get on board with one of the central vehicles for loving one's neighbor as oneself. Guess what! Turns out I've been getting on the wrong bus!

We don't have time today to learn everything that Dr. Luskin has spent fifteen years researching and teaching, but I would like to share a few things that I found amazingly freeing and that helped me to heal some old hurts and deal with new grievances. For instance, Dr. Luskin teaches that forgiveness is a process, not a one-time event. It's a process, one that takes time, patience, and perseverance. It may take years to work through all the nine steps necessary for the healing and inner peace that comes with being able to truly forgive someone.

Maybe that is why, in The Lord's Prayer, the line, "Forgive us our debts," follows "Give us this day our daily bread." Like the bread we need each day, forgiveness is a practice that is daily and life giving.

A second insight that Dr. Luskin shared is that forgiveness is not the same as forgetting. I repeat: forgiveness does not mean forgetting. Nor is it the same as condoning evil or wrongdoing. Forgiveness does not mean we have to seek reconciliation. It does not require that the offender admit to wrongdoing. Forgiveness does not exclude seeking justice. On the contrary, when we are

forgiving, we can think more clearly and be more effective in working for justice—if that is what we choose to do.

Forgiveness is for you and no one else. It is a choice you make to face evil, to articulate your pain in a safe and nurturing environment to a few trustworthy people, and eventually, to let go of the hard shell of protection that being a victim can offer. Then and only then can you move beyond your grievances to a new life story that frees you to live from a basis of love, hope, and gratitude.

No wonder forgiveness is a moment-to-moment experience, a process that has to be repeated over and over again! Not just seven or even seventy-seven times! (Matthew 18:22) But as often and as long as it takes. And as a wise friend of ours always says, "It always takes longer than it takes."

Could that be why the line in The Lord's Prayer that says, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," is followed by "And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one"?

So just HOW do you get on the right forgiveness bus in the first place? How do you get your body to let go of the addictive, chain-reacting physiology of anger, hurt, fear, and sadness?

It's very simple, really. And basically as easy as breathing. In fact, it is breathing. Breathing slowly and deeply, from the belly. Breathing with the image of something that has strong, positive feelings for you, such as a joyful experience with a loved one or a beautiful, awe-inspiring scene in nature.

Once you have that positive image in mind and are into the rhythm of deep breathing, you then bring the image and your breath to the area around your heart. Then ask yourself what the strongest positive and most loving language is for you to describe your goal for healing from the situation that hurt you. With your goal clearly in mind, repeat it to yourself three times as you continue to breathe deeply.

Repeating this process over time can free you from big and small grievances that we all face day in and day out. I recommend reading *Forgive for Good* for a much fuller explanation of exactly how to forgive. What I've shared is just a few highlights to get you started on the journey, one I've found to be immensely helpful.

Like this table before us, the forgiveness process is something you'll want to come back to time and time again. It's not a one-time event.

Nor is it about forgetting. Like this table before us, it's something we approach as a way to help us remember and see things in a new light.

Like this table before us, it does not deny the difficulties of life but keeps presenting us with unending possibilities for joyful living.

Why would we spend our precious time choosing anything else?