Book 12

Sunday, March 20, 1983

"TWO-WAY FORGIVENESS"

(Continuing the series on the Lord's Prayer)

Matthew 18:21-35 or
Luke 7:36-50

"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Jesus was a strong advocate of forgiveness. He not only taught forgiveness, he practiced it every day. He ate with sinners and accepted them. He knew through his own experiences of life and through his study of the Old Testament that nature does not blame nor point its finger when things go wrong. Nature always endeavors to heal or correct an injury or hurt.

For example, when I cut my finger, the life forces in my body immediately rush to the aid of the injured area to fight off infection and start the coagulation of the blood to prevent excessive bleeding. The body doesn't first attempt to seek out the one who did the damage or try to place the blame. Its only interest is to repair the wound. Blaming doesn't heal anything, but forgiveness does.

Forgiveness is at the very center of our Christian faith. Paul wrote to the Romans, "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Our faith makes room for human weaknesses and faults. It is built on forgiveness.

Forgiveness frees us from past errors and enables us to start on a new path of life.

But forgiveness is not always easy, even for those who think of themselves as being religious. In the story which was read from the Gospel of Luke this morning, Jesus and a religious leader of that time were having dinner together when they were interrupted by a "woman of the city." The religious man who had invited Jesus finds his religion creates a chasm between him and the woman, while Jesus is drawn toward her with forgiveness and a blessing of peace.

Jesus' host found it difficult to be forgiving of others because he did not sense his own need for forgiveness. And that can be our problem. We forget that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. Thus, true forgiveness of others begins with a sense

of our own need for forgiveness. That's why Jesus included this petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Granting forgiveness to others and receiving forgiveness from others and from God is to be a daily experience.

Before we look at forgiveness and what it means in more detail, note again that we pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." The pronouns are plural. We do not pray, "Forgive me my sins," or, "Please, God, forgive his sins or her sins or their sins." Here is an antidote for our eternal tendency to self-righteousness.

Isn't it true that often we try to excuse ourselves by placing all the blame on others. It's their debts, not our debts, that need to be forgiven. This is true in our personal lives, as well as in international relations. We say, "The Soviet Union is solely responsible for the arms race!" And the Russians say, "The United States is solely responsible for the arms race!"

Each time we try to place the blame only on someone else, we are also implying that we are the focus of virtue. Inordinate self-righteousness, the conviction that one is the appointed partner of the Almighty, is a perilous thing. This kind of belief only causes more trouble. Too much bloodshed in the past and in the present has been caused by people who all believe in God, but hear different instructions when God speaks. Look at the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, or Ireland in our own time.

The doctrine of sin which the Bible teaches means that the focus of evil lies not in a particular nation or group or institution, but in the human soul itself and its estrangement from God. Sin results from the fatal inclination of all people to overestimate their own virtue. Nations have the same tendency.

So this petition from the Lord's Prayer reminds us to quit trying to excuse ourselves from any blame and in so doing try to cover up our faults and shortcomings, our debts. Rather, we are to admit them. This petition reminds us that the enemy is also us. Whereas self-righteousness misleads us into

believing that if we could only get all those other individuals and nations to stop their wrong-doing, the world would be in peace.

The need for forgiveness is for us and for everyone. In these words we bring to God the whole mountainous burden of sin that weighs upon the whole world.

Now, to understand better this petition, let's look more closely at the word "debts." All of us know what that word means when we are using it to describe money we owe to a bank or some other kind of business or individual. A debt is something we owe, something that has not yet been paid.

In the way the word "debts" is used here, it means something we have neglected or omitted or owe, but more than in a monetary sense. In other words, it refers to what are often called "sins of omission." As the opening prayer of confession for this morning puts it, "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done."

Usually we think of sin in terms of things we have done, but should not have done. Those are more easily identified. I was rude to someone for no reason. A person is dishonest, when he should have been honest. But do you remember the individual you noticed with sadness on her face, the one who was waiting for a word of comfort, and you acted as if you didn't notice her? Or do you remember the colleague at work who is somewhat withdrawn, and not easy to get next to? Nobody pays much attention to him, until suddenly it turns out he is very unhappy because something is wrong in his family? And then you say, "How could I have failed to see what was going on?" and you are sorry you never said a good word to him.

How often in the cases of suicide have I heard relatives and friends say, "I had no idea that anything was wrong with her! Why did we not suspect it?" The love of God which Jesus taught and lived does not go into action with its help and support after we have learned that a need exists. On the contrary, love helps us to discover those needs. Love, when it is present, not only helps us to heal wounds, but above all, to discover wounds.

It is easy enough to pat ourselves on the back and say that we have not done anything wrong. We can think of no sinful acts we have committed. But maybe we are like the Levite and the Priest who passed by the man in the ditch on the road to Jericho. "We have left undone those things we ought to have done." "Forgive us our debts."

So often we hear people say today, "I don't want to get involved; the issues are too complex." Yet after the second world war, we blamed the German people for having exactly the same attitude while the Nazis were killing the Jews. In the nuclear arms debate which rages around us today, we have the obligation to get involved. I'm talking here about each one of us getting all the facts and knowledge we can on both sides of the issue. No matter whether you are for more nuclear armaments or fewer, you need to know something about the horrors that will ensue, should such weapons be used.

I'm afraid that too many of us are becoming de-sensitized to the violence and horror that is around us. I know the feeling. Many times I simply want to close my eyes and ears to the problems of the world.

And so we need to pray, "Forgive us our debts." And we know that the God to whom we pray does forgive us, and more than that, this loving God is involved with us in the sufferings of the world. And then as we begin again to get involved, the power of God's love takes its place within us and alongside us and helps us in our weakness.

Remember next that this petition about forgiveness speaks of "two-way forgiveness." "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." We all like the first half of the sentence, for we all long to be free of our offenses and the guilt which accompanies them. But there's a catch to it: "as we forgive our debtors."

In the Christian faith, nothing remains shut up in our inner life. Everything in it immediately thrusts out and seeks to become an action. At the next moment, God always puts us to work.

So what we ourselves have experienced in forgiveness immediately demands to become effective in our relationship to others. When God is generous and forgives us our many debts, we cannot be petty, unforgiving individuals and complain about having to forgive another.

This is the one and only way to solve the question of guilt that stands between us and another person, the guilt in our marriage, in our family, at work, or with someone we consider our friend. Only the thought of what God has done for us and what God has forgiven can suddenly lift us above the situation and deliver us from a lurking reaction to anger and bitterness and give us the freedom to forgive.

Thus, being forgiven and practicing forgiveness toward others go hand in hand. One cannot be had without the other. It's so easy and natural to want God and others to forgive us our mistakes. We want people to put up with our shortcomings. But how well do we put up with their shortcomings? Yet in this prayer we are asking: "Let me experience the same freedom from my offenses as I have allowed others to experience."

Yet how many times have we heard people say or heard ourselves say, "I forgive him," and then a few minutes later they or we are talking about him again. We haven't released the offense. We're still holding on to it.

When we hold grudges and allow them to build up in our minds, we suffer mentally and physically. We often become unbearable to live with. Think about it for a moment. Is there someone in your life and in your past or present that you still haven't forgiven?

Last Sunday morning one of our members gave me a prayer which had recently been quoted in "Dear Abby." Here's what it says:

> *I have been humiliated and hurt by a certain person. You know who I mean, God. You know, too, that I am struggling to keep bitterness and hate out of my heart. But it's so very difficult to find the grace to forgive. Will*

you help me, God? I don't want to crowd these bad feelings into the dark corners of my mind. I don't want to deny to myself the fact that I feel awful. But I do want to forgive and get the hostility and anger out of my system. At this very moment, perhaps someone, somewhere, is having a hard time forgiving me for something I said or did. I might have hurt that person without knowing it. So please, God, help me to forgive now. It would be terrible to harbor ill will against someone who might not even know he has hurt me. Amen.

But just what is forgiveness? What is its content and action? It does not mean that we cover up a fault or condone wrongdoing. Nor is it some kind of psychological trick or clever manipulation. Furthermore, "forgiveness" and "forgetting" are two different issues.

Every one of us who can say, "I am a pardoned or forgiven sinner," knows very well that this does not mean: "I do not sin any more; I am holy and perfect." We know only too well that things still lurk within us. Forgiveness means rather that my sins, my debts, no longer separate me from God and from others. There is no longer a chasm that cuts me off.

Isn't this exactly what happens when a parent forgives a child, or a child the parent, or a wife forgives her husband, or the husband the wife? When some deception is practiced between one human being and another, something between them is broken. Thus, we say quite correctly, "There is something 'between' us."

And the one who grants the forgiveness does not mean, "I forget it." She can never forget it. Even in old age, she may feel an icy chill when she thinks of that deception which her husband or child uttered long ago. Forgiveness means: This shall not separate us. The bond of love is stronger than the separating power that would come between.

And the same is true of God's forgiveness of us. God's forgiveness and our acceptance of it means the separation has been healed. God's love is stronger than any separating power that can come between us.

Thus, St. Paul could write in his letter to the Romans, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" And then he goes through a long list of things that cannot separate us from God's love.

More than that, when God forgives, God does not merely eliminate our debt; God gives us a new lease on life. God replaces guilt with a new dream and gives us the trust to take hold of it. Our self-esteem is restored.

But there is something more to consider about forgiveness. Our faith teaches us that our own forgiveness comes through the act of forgiving others. If we don't forgive others, it's hard for us to forgive ourselves. People who refuse to forgive others usually won't forgive themselves either. But when we forgive others, we will not hold a grudge against ourselves. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Amen.