

Sunday, October 6, 2019 – World Communion Sunday

First Reading is Nehemiah 1:4-7

⁴ When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. ⁵ I said, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments; ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. ⁷ We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses.

Desmond Tutu once said, “Without forgiveness, there is no future.” Nehemiah understood this truth for the people Israel, who returned in waves from their Babylonian exile. Although, Ezra had overseen the reconstruction of the Temple, the great walls and city gates of Jerusalem still lay in ruins.

Nehemiah though remembered the word God gave to God’s people through his servant Moses, “If they return to me and keep my commandments and do them, I will gather them and bring them to the place I have chose to establish my house.” Nehemiah understood that with God’s forgiveness, there would be a future with hope for the holy city and its people. And through this text we heard Nehemiah’s confession, his return to God, as he called out to God to remember this promise.

“Without forgiveness, there is no future.” Yet, “With forgiveness, there is a future.” With this good news, now let us listen to Jesus’s words from the Gospel of Matthew.

Second Reading is Matthew 6:9-15

⁹ “Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,

but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The Message is entitled, “Forgive Us.”

This afternoon, I begin by asking a few questions. Raise your hand if you have ever been wronged, cheated, betrayed, hurt or harmed by another person? Any recent incidents come to mind? Is the emotional pain of this still raw? I think it is safe to say that most of us have no problem recounting the times when others failed us. When we were hurt or harmed by

another. The occurrence may be recent or long past. It is even possible that some resentment may linger for what was done or left undone to you or someone you loved. Sometimes this resentment can build within us and even consume us.

Priest Elias Chacour, a Palestinian Christian, hurried out into a moonless night to attend to the imminent death of an elderly woman in his village. The woman lived with her eldest son, the village policeman, Abu Mouhib. Father Chacour was with the woman whispering words of comfort until her rasped breathing ceased. Trying his best as the new village priest he offered to go and tell Abu's three brothers saying, "They surely would like to come and see her." Abu Mouhib's response was immediate and forceful; "My brothers do not set foot in my house. If they dare to come here you will have five funerals on your hands, because we will kill each other." Something had happened between these four brothers, someone had been wronged, grudges had been nursed, anger seethed just below the surface, so much so that even the death of their mother could not draw these brothers together. [Pause]

We have all been wronged by others and I believe that is why the Lord's Prayer continues to be one of the most challenging prayers you and I will ever pray, especially our particular phrase today, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Every Sunday we acknowledge that we have debts with God and with each other. Yet, what are our debts?

Let me ask you another question. How many of you have ever wronged, cheated, betrayed, or hurt another person intentionally or even unintentionally? There is not nearly as much enthusiasm in responding to this question. You see, it is much harder to admit our own sin or at least to enthusiastically admit it. We have far more energy pointing out someone else's faults. It is much harder to see that we, too, could harbor as much resentment as the four brothers that Father Chacour wrote about in his book entitled, *Blood Brothers*.

It is much harder to look within ourselves and confess how we need forgiveness for what we have done or left undone. Yet, none of us are debt free or sinless as scripture reminds us: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." [1 John 1:8] We all have accounts in arrears and when we pray, "Forgive us our debts," we acknowledge our utter dependence on God to clear our accounts, to forgive what we can never repay.

Like Nehemiah then, we must confess. We must confess that we have not obeyed the commandments of the Lord. We have worshipped other gods such as wealth, power, youth, and security to name just a few. We have envied our neighbors and slandered others. We have not produced the fruit of the Spirit with our lives. We start arguments rather than seek peaceful resolutions. We harbor bitterness rather than spread joy. We hoard rather than share generously. We lose our self-control and forget about being gentle and kind. We do not clothe ourselves with compassion and humility. A long hard look at ourselves reveals what Father Chacour encountered one night.

Elias wrote, "I lay there [in bed] wrestling against the whole world of conflict that sprawled around me... those four brothers, my congregation, the priest who had stolen from the church, fellow seminarians who had slandered all Palestinians." The images of everyone he encountered who was conflicted first came to mind, then images of everyone who had ever harmed him personally flooded his mind... and then he knew... that he too was capable of viciously harming another. He was suddenly aware that people everywhere despite the thin polite veneer of society were capable of harming each other. It was then that he heard anew

the words of Jesus on the cross, "Father forgive them." Elias then prayed, "And forgive me, too."

Elias confessed. Nehemiah confessed. And we, too, must confess. This is why our reformed tradition has the practice of the prayer of confession each Sunday. Each and every Sunday we corporately confess. We prayed today, "We confess that forgiving others does not come easy. We find it too easy to hold grudges. We prefer to seek revenge and retribution. Forgive our unwillingness to forgive others as you have forgiven us." Yes, the way of forgiveness is not easy. [Pause]

Bud Welch's 23-year-old daughter, Julie, was killed in the Oklahoma City federal building bombing. When Bud heard of Timothy McVeigh's arrest he only felt rage and a desire for vengeance. McVeigh's lack of repentance only made his anger hotter. He said, "I just wanted him fried."

Bud's hate took him on a journey of sleepless nights and drunken binges to numb the pain. It also led him to visit the bombing site. On that visit, at the site of so much pain and suffering, he vowed to change. He had remembered watching Bill McVeigh, the bomber's father, on television. Standing physically at the site suddenly connected Bud to the pain and grief in Bill for his son's actions.

Bud decided to reach out and meet with Bill McVeigh. When they met and sat together, they talked about their children, one who was dead and one who would soon be. Forgiveness and mercy overwhelmed Bud. Bud said, "I never felt closer to God than I did at that moment." When asked later about those who resented his forgiveness of Timothy McVeigh, he said, "They think they'll get some kind of healing. There's nothing about killing that's going to help them."

Bud knew the truth that without forgiveness there would be no future for him. He realized that his rage and desire for revenge would never solve anything. He knew without a doubt why Matthew's gospel included an "if." It's not that God will not forgive us, it's that we cannot receive God's forgiveness locked in rage and revenge. Only mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation would make a way forward for Bud or anyone else.

Elias Chacour knew this was the only way forward too; for the warring factions of his congregation, including the four grieved brothers. He knew the only way forward was mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation. So, one Sunday, at the end of the service, he actually put a chain on the church doors and locked them. Next he said this to his congregation, "Sitting in this building does not make you a Christian. You are a people divided. You argue and hate each other – gossip and spread malicious rumors. If you can't love your brother [and sister] that you see, how can you say you love God who is invisible?"

Forgiveness is hard, especially when the wrong is grievous. Yet, forgiveness is necessary. It doesn't make the wrong right. But it does free us from its control. It is the only way forward for us. It makes our future possible and that is why we pray, each and every Sunday, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

Now I must point out something of importance in this prayer. The Greek word for "as" can be translated "in proportion to." That is, when we pray we are asking God to forgive us... to forgive us... in proportion to the way we forgive others.

You see, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors: is a clever phrase," writes Mulholland. "In one sentence, it reminds us of so much. We have sinned against others. We need forgiveness. Others have sinned against us. They need forgiveness. Our Father is a

forgiving God and we need to be as forgiving. "The question is," writes Mulholland is this: "Do we want God's forgiveness to be diminished or our mercy expanded?"

Father Chacour confessed to his divided congregation on that Sunday, "For many months, I've tried to unite you. I've failed, because I am only a man. But there is someone else who can bring you together in true unity. His name is Jesus Christ. He is the one who gives you power to forgive." Jesus is the one who gives you and I the power to forgive those who have harmed us, like Bud Welch who forgave Timothy McVeigh. Jesus is the one who gives us power to forgive ourselves, like Nehemiah, who realized his own contribution to Israel's captivity. Jesus is the one who makes reconciliation between God and others possible, like Abu Mouhib on that one Sunday who faltered and said to the congregation locked inside the church, "I am sorry. I am the worst of all. I've hated my own brothers. Hated so much I wanted to kill them. More than any of you I need forgiveness."

"When a deep injury is done to us, we never recover until we forgive," writes Alan Paton, a South African writer and educator. And Mother Theresa adds, "If we really want to love, we must learn to forgive."

Friends, God's grace is not an "if." God's grace is not given in response to our repentance, but in anticipation of it. While we were yet sinners, before we repented, God began to pour out his forgiveness on us. God says, "You are loved. Let me pour my grace over your head and allow it to run down your shoulders. Allow my mercy to refresh and renew and cleanse." This is the God to whom we pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

Do you harbor resentment towards anyone today? Are you wishing someone ill? Do you hope that revenge will be executed? Have you withheld forgiveness?

Do we want God to use the measures we've applied to others or do we yearn for God's infinite grace and mercy? "Forgive us," we pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." By the Spirit at work within us, may we be as forgiving as the God whom we worship and serve. Amen.