

Jeff's Reflection – Aug 8

Sometimes, when praying the Lord's Prayer, we might pause at today's section and realize that this is so typical of so many of our prayers.

"Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our debts,
As we also have forgiven our debtors".

Give us...and forgive us!

Give us...and forgive us!

We pray from a sense of need – need for bread...need for forgiveness.

Give us this day our daily bread. Jesus spoke to people who knew the story of God giving bread – the identity-forming, faith-forming story of Moses leading an enslaved people out of Egypt and into the wilderness.

And in that wilderness, that hot, barren place, the people grew hungry, and they complained to Moses, saying that Moses had led them to die in this harsh place. They said that they would be better off to have stayed in Egypt. There they might be treated as slaves, but at least they were given something to eat!

What would they eat in the wilderness? Who would feed them in the wilderness?

God would. God would provide manna – a thin, white slightly sweet tasting substance. God told the people that each day they should collect just enough manna to eat that day (except on the day before the Sabbath, when they were to gather enough for two days).

Give us this day our daily bread.

First century followers of Jesus would also be familiar with the Roman Emperor's practice of 'bread and circuses' – sometimes providing the people with free flour from which to make bread, and free 'circuses', or entertainment, which might mean watching gladiators battle to the death in an arena.

"Give us this day our daily bread" – to pray that as first century Christians was to confess that it is God that provides sun, rain, soil, crops, flour and bread. They depended on God, not the Emperor, to provide a way to live. They were loyal to God, not to Caesar.

Give us this day our daily bread...and FORGIVE us ... and here we come to variations in the prayer. Matthew's version reads:

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

Luke’s version read:

“And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.”

Then we have the translation offered by William Tyndale (1494-1536). His translation, that became popular during the Reformation, reads:

“And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Different wordings, but all of them recognizing that life depends on not only the giving of bread- of food – but on the giving of forgiveness, the giving of an act of compassion that makes future relationships possible.

Forgive us our debts – Jesus lived in a world in which being in financial debt was a frightening, and often life-threatening, experience. Unpaid debt meant you were sent to prison. Those who were wealthy would loan money to farmers in times of drought or crop failure. Failure to repay the loan meant you lost your farm, your vineyard, your land, and either were allowed to work for the new owner or became one who lived day by day, hoping someone would hire you as temporary help, or else you had to beg in hope of surviving.

When Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah, saying the Spirit of God had anointed him to proclaim good news to the poor and release of the prisoners, he may well have been referring to the release of people from debtor’s prison.

The prayer may also recall the Biblical vision of a year of Jubilee, in which every 50 years debts would be forgiven and land returned to its original owners – an economic strategy of periodically ending the widening gap between rich and poor, and giving families in debt a new chance to live.

Luke’s version of the prayer says, “Forgive us our sins” but then says “as we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us”, so the writer of Luke’s gospel may have been using the word ‘sin’ as a way of referring to debt.

The version “forgive us our trespasses” is slightly different. To trespass is to infringe on someone else’s property, rights, space. To trespass is to violate boundaries and to therefore in some way violate a person’s sense of safety. While different than debt, trespasses also have the effect of disrupting one’s life, one’s manageable world, and putting in a place of uncertainty and instability.

So we pray:

“Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our debts,
As we also have forgiven our debtors” .

And as we pray we open ourselves to living in God's world.

We confess that it is God's creation that is our source of life; God's creation that provides for our lives...

And we confess that we live by what is given and forgiven, by what we gratefully receive and what we gracefully relinquish – relinquish actions that punish others, that dominate others, that impoverish others, relinquish holding onto our hurt and our resentment. Relinquish the desire to get even.

When we pray these words, we confess that one way God's spirit is expressed is through us, that God forgives as we forgive; that when we pray that we receive we also pray that we give to others what we receive.

Today, when we pray these words, they invite us into God's work of new creation – to be present in our humanity as source of healing, forgiveness, blessing and grace.

Today, when we pray these words, they invite us to help envision and create relationships for the sharing of bread and the forgiving of debts and the creation of God's new community.

Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors.

AMEN