

**Sermon Preached by The Rev. Dr. Moni McIntyre  
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, PA  
on Tuesday in the First Week of Lent, Year B  
The Lenten Preaching Series  
February 20, 2024**

Sisters and brothers, it is so wonderful to be back here at Calvary. I'm grateful to Jonathon and all the folks of Calvary and everybody who made this evening such a delight.

Your theme this year, as you know, is hope rooted in Christ. When I looked over the readings for tonight, I came to the same conclusion that apparently everybody else did, and that was that the gospel was just irresistible. What struck me is what struck all of Calvary, it appears, is these words from Matthew's gospel which also show up in Luke's gospel, "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." If any words can suck hope from a person, it is the thought that I will be forgiven by God as I have forgiven Aunt Wilma and Uncle Rufus and whoever else and all the people of this world that I have trouble with and that have trouble with me and I never probably will completely and truly appreciate.

So what sense can we make of this text? And that to me is a very challenging text. We read, there are three important concepts it seems to me in this section here. We read, "Your father knows what you need before you ask him and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." So I'd like to look at each point in turn. First, the use of the term "father" in this text. Second, Jesus' assertion that God knows what we need before we ask. And third, the request for forgiveness in a measure for measure context.

So first, the use of the word "father" in the text. Clearly, Matthew did not indicate or seem to believe that God was male. That's not the point. God has no sex. God can't be male. What's going on here? The metaphorical identification of God as father is typical for Matthew. And as we see in chapter 6, the first 18 verses, the term father is used 10 times. So this is a significant concept. What's going on here? Matthew finds the masculine reference appropriate for conveying the image of an authority figure to readers who live in a patriarchal society. They wouldn't have understood or believed much of anything else. So this makes sense in that time and place. So God is not only a caring parent, but also the head of the household. The one whose unilateral decisions are to be respected by the whole family of believers.

So somebody is in charge and Matthew is calling him Father. So by encouraging his followers to call God Father, Matthew's Jesus urges them both to respect God's authority and to trust in God's generosity and providential wisdom. So this, he's saying amazing things about who God is. Second, Jesus asserts that God knows what we need before we ask. If this is true, then for whose benefit do we pray? Sisters and

brothers, it becomes patently clear in this text that the reason we pray is for our own benefit. We come before God not to give information to God that God couldn't have received some other way, or to build our case. God knows all this. We come before God to accept in the depth of our being the prime fact that we are creatures. We come before God to acknowledge that our lives are the gifts of God's hands, and we wish to commit ourselves to the Thou who speaks and answers and first calls. Our prayer is the all-pervasive longing for happiness, for personal fulfillment. We come before God in unconditional and sensitive openness to God. We pour out our soul before God and to God who already knows us more deeply than we will ever even know ourselves.

All prayer then is wholly, W-H-O-L-L-Y, the gift of God. Finally, if prayer is the great religious act, and we believe it is, then what does it mean to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors?" What are we asking God for, and why would Jesus instruct us in this way? In the Christian tradition, forgiveness is the sinner's transforming acceptance of the unconditional mercy of God through Jesus the Christ, and the subsequent extending of that experience to other persons by accepting them. The practice of forgiveness is central to the Christian identity, as described in that gospel and in what we call the Lord's Prayer. And it is to be offered as often as it is requested. We have a responsibility, sisters and brothers, to imitate God, to follow God's lead in forgiving. Note that the need to forgive is the only facet of Jesus' moral teaching, deemed so important that His followers are to remind themselves of it every time they pray. All prayer is wholly the gift of God. And prayer, likewise, is human action.

The cause "forgive us our debts" asserts some connection between our treatment of one another and God's treatment of us. But it does not affirm an exact proportionality. God is more merciful and more generous and more gracious than we are or ever could be. And as we see all over the Scriptures, where then is our hope? We can have hope if our hope is rooted in Jesus the Christ, who teaches us the importance of forgiveness for ourselves and society at large. Forgiveth our debts is the request that we make to be released from the indebtedness of past failures in order to live in full and open relationship in the Kingdom of God. Let us pray for the gift of forgiveness of others so that we may truly appreciate God's gift of forgiveness of ourselves. And as we proceed and try and figure out what this means in this world, in our families, in our parishes, we've got to trust that the God who gave us the instruction will give us the grace to do the very best we can, whether we do it perfectly or not. Amen.