

This morning we tackle the last portion of the Lord's Prayer together, as found in Matthew chapter 6, this being the fourth and last sermon in a series based on the Lord's prayer. I want to start by thanking Pastor Robb for assigning me the easiest portion of the prayer - the one touching on the very simple concepts of forgiveness, temptation and evil - all in one sermon. I hope you don't have lunch plans. We're going to be here a while. Just kidding.

First a few words about this prayer in general that interest me and haven't been mentioned yet in the series. This prayer is attributed to Jesus as part of his great Sermon on the Mount which covers three whole chapters in Matthew's gospel. In fact, Matthew makes the subject of prayer the structural and theological center of the Sermon on the Mount, with, specifically, the "Lord's Prayer" the core of the center. Prayer is central to our experience of God.

The word *theology* means "the study and analysis of God and God's attributes". Karl Barth rightly affirmed, "the first and basic act of theological work is prayer." Prayer, in a sense, is doing theology, theology is prayer. What we pray for simultaneously shapes and expresses our theology or understanding of God. Matthew's decision to place the Lord's prayer at the center of Jesus' instruction in the Sermon on the Mount dissolved the line between acts of worship and theology. Everything we do in worship, in a sense, is prayer and is also working out our theology. But not only worship, our works of justice - everything we do "for the least of these" then is also theology - a working out and analyzing what we believe about God. When we provide a donation for Vacation Bible School, or send a card to someone who is grieving or meet with others and talk about God in any way - that IS prayer and that IS doing theology.

The second interesting point about this prayer is that it was originally taught by Jesus in Aramaic, not Hebrew. Aramaic was the common language of the Jewish people, different from the official synagogue language of Hebrew that mainly the elite priests & scribes used. One of the reasons we know this is because the word used for God - *Abba* - is a transliteration of the Aramaic for Father. In Greek it would have been *pater*. I like knowing that Jesus taught this in Aramaic. That God, through Jesus is

speaking to all people, which teaches me to also reach out and care for all people.

So briefly about forgiveness. Verse 12 of Matthew chapter 6 from the original language reads: "And forgive our debts, as also we forgive the debtors of us." The way we recite this line of the prayer in worship is, "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Sometimes this sounds too much like a formula to me. If we forgive those who wronged us, and then God will forgive us. We can demand God's forgiveness, because we first forgave. After studying forgiveness throughout the Bible, I think that is not the most helpful way to understand this petition. I think Romans 5:8 gives us the clearest understanding of forgiveness, "God shows his love for us, because *while we were yet sinners*, Christ died for us." and also Ephesians 4:32 is helpful, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, *as God in Christ forgave you.*" We forgive after the example of God, who in His great mercy, forgave before we understood our own debt, our own moral wrongs. It's like an overflowing cup. We have assurance of our own forgiveness and so we desire to show that forgiveness we've experienced to others.

My personal example of this revolves around my wedding. I have three older brothers, which I think I've mentioned before. The youngest and I tended to be at odds most of the time growing up, though we're 7 years apart. We're just very different people, very different personalities so we clashed often. One of our differences was our understanding of the Bible. Taking a more fundamental point of view, my brother, and his wife at the time, couldn't support my call to be a pastor, my seminary graduation and especially ordination itself in the United Methodist Church. When Mark and I decided to get married and I sent them an invitation, my sister-in-law sent a lengthy letter in reply. It outlined some scriptures and described why they could never support my marriage and would not be attending, because I was in violation of God's law as a female pastor/teacher and the role I'd be playing in my household was unacceptable to them. It was painful to receive that letter. I felt sad and angry too. But all I can say is God's grace is bigger than sadness and greater than anger. My experience was that I was able to send them a card back that said something genuine and

honest. It said, "It would mean a lot to me if you would be at the wedding. I hope you decide to come." And they did. My sister-in-law and I hugged and forgave each other and my brother and I danced. Since then my brother, Paul, and I have gotten closer each year, which is what I always wanted anyway. Because God forgave me I am free also to forgive.

I like how Miroslav Volf, A Yale Divinity School theologian says it. "We forgive unconditionally, because that's what God does. He forgives without waiting for us to repent. The decision to forgive is easy, but the act of forgiving is very difficult. Forgiveness sometimes comes in droplets...in bits and pieces. You forgive this little piece, but you can't forgive the whole thing. Then you forgive for a while and then you wake up in the middle of the night and dark thoughts go through your head and you say, 'Wow! I take all of it back.' Then the next morning you think about it more, you pray, you come into the presence of God and you say, 'Well, I think I ought to, I do forgive, I'm free to forgive.' It goes in a repeated cycle. I believe we need to think of forgiveness not as a single act of will that is finished and then we move on, but as a practice, as a living into it through time."

Even more briefly, a look at the first part of verse 13 - "And do not bring us into the time of trial" or as we say in worship "And lead us not into temptation." These are the few words of this prayer that give me a difficult time, because James 1:13 & 14 tells us, "No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and He tempts no one. But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it." So why did Jesus teach people to pray, "lead us not into temptation" if God does not tempt? One way I make sense of this is to understand that the original Aramaic, from what I studied, doesn't say "lead us not", but is most likely "let us not" or to put it in the positive rather than negative, "keep us from" temptation. This God can do and is happy to be asked help with. Also, other Biblical translations use the word trial or test rather than temptation. And as we heard in Genesis chapter 22, there is scriptural evidence of God testing of his people. Not only in Genesis, but also the testing in Exodus (Exodus 15:25) of God's people in the wilderness, and the testing of Job and also Jesus and the disciples in the

garden of Gethsemane. To me, a test of my faith is different than temptation toward evil. So the prayer "keep us from temptation" or "keep us from trials" makes much more sense and is a prayer easy for me to say as often as possible. I can say it the other way, when I know this is what I mean when I say it.

Briefest yet - I'll say this about the final phrase in verse 13. As we say it in worship "But deliver us from evil." Since Jesus taught this prayer first in Aramaic, and the Aramaic language is organized and defined by a poetical system where different meanings of every word are possible, every line of this prayer could be translated different ways in English. Several years ago, one of the other senior pastors I worked with, Rev. Dick George, also gave a sermon series on the Lord's Prayer. In it he taught us a version directly from the Aramaic. He said what we have in verse 13, really can't be separated into two parts, as I've done today. It's meant to be understood all together. And in the end it's meaning is something like this: "And don't let us be seduced by that which diverts us from the purpose of our lives." As I studied other versions on the internet from the Aramaic, this phrase "from our true purpose" kept coming up. Now some of us, as followers of Christ, talk about evil as an idea and some of us talk about evil as a being. I realize we have some difference of opinion about this. But either way, if God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer gave us life for the purpose of glorifying Him and being in relationship with Him, which I think boils all of this down to an amazing point, then anything, whether being or idea which diverts us from that purpose I would say is evil, is against God, is against good. And it just reminds me, which I believe this prayer is supposed to do - that I am His and He is mine and today I can have assurance deep in my heart, in the depths of my soul, that I am loved, no matter what and there is a place for me in His kingdom both now and forever. Amen.