

“The Lord’s Prayer: Forgive Us Our Trespasses...” Lent V EUMC 3/9/08
by the Rev. Dr. Kathlyn James texts: *Matt. 6:5-12 & Matthew 18: 21-35

In a book entitled *Forgive and Forget*, Lewis Smedes relates a fable called **“The Magic Eyes.”** Let me begin, this morning, by sharing it with you:

In the village of Faken, in innermost Friesland, there once lived a baker named Fouke, a righteous man, with a long thin chin and a long thin nose. Fouke was so upright that he seemed to spray righteousness from his thin lips over everyone who came near him; so the people of Faken preferred to stay away.

Fouke’s wife, Hilda, was short and round. Hilda didn’t keep people at bay with righteousness; her soft roundness seemed to invite them instead to come close to her, to share the warmth of her open heart. Hilda respected her righteous husband, and loved him too, as much as he allowed her. But her heart ached for something more from him. And there, in the bed of her need, lay the seed of sadness.

One morning, having worked since dawn to knead his dough for the ovens, Fouke came home and found a stranger in his bedroom, lying on Hilda’s round bosom.

Hilda’s adultery soon became the scandal of Faken. Everyone assumed that Fouke would cast Hilda out of his house. But he surprised everyone by keeping Hilda as his wife, saying he forgave her as the Good Book said he should.

In his heart of hearts, however, Fouke could not forgive Hilda. Whenever he thought about her, his feelings were angry and hard. When it came right down to it, he hated Hilda for betraying him after he had been so good and faithful a husband to her. He only pretended to forgive her, so that he could punish her with his righteous mercy. But Fouke’s fakery did not sit well in heaven.

So each time that Fouke would feel his secret hate toward Hilda, an angel came to him and dropped a small pebble, hardly the size of a shirt button, into Fouke’s heart. Each time a pebble dropped, Fouke would feel a stab of pain, like the pain he had felt the morning he came upon Hilda feeding her hungry heart from a stranger’s larder. Thus he hated her all the more. His hate brought him pain, and his pain made him hate.

The pebbles multiplied. And Fouke’s heart grew heavy with the weight of them, so heavy that the top half of his body bent forward, and he had to strain his neck upward in order to see straight ahead. Weary with hurt, Fouke began to wish he were dead.

The angel who dropped pebbles into his heart came to Fouke one night and told him how he could be healed. There was one remedy, the angel said, for the hurt of a wounded heart. Fouke would need the miracle of the magic eyes. He would need eyes that could look back to the beginning of his hurt and see his Hilda, not as the wife who had betrayed him, but as a weak woman who needed him. Only a new way of looking at things through the magic eyes could heal the hurt flowing from the wound of yesterday.

Fouke protested. “Nothing can change the past, he said. “Hilda is guilty, a fact that not even an angel can change.” “Yes, poor hurting man,” the angel said. “You cannot change the past, you can only heal the hurt that comes to you from the past. And you can heal it only with the vision of the magic eyes.” “And how can I get your magic eyes?” asked Fouke.

“Only ask, desiring as you ask, and they will be given to you. And each time you see Hilda through your new eyes, one pebble will be lifted from your aching heart.”

Fouke could not ask at once, for he had grown to love his hatred. But part of his heart finally drove him to want to ask for the magic eyes that the angel had promised. So he asked. And the angel gave. Soon Hilda began to change in front of Fouke’s eyes, wonderfully and mysteriously. He began to see her as a needy woman who loved him, instead of a wicked woman who had betrayed him.

The angel kept his promise. He lifted the pebbles from Fouke’s heart, one by one, though it took a long time to take them all away. Fouke gradually felt his heart grow lighter; he began to walk straight again, and somehow his nose and chin seemed less sharp than before. He invited Hilda to come into his heart again, and she came, and together they began again, a journey into their second season of humble joy.

This morning, in this Lenten series of sermons on the Lord’s Prayer, we come to the line, **“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”** As the prayer suggests, and as our fable illustrates, claiming forgiveness for oneself and giving forgiveness to others are related. They are so intimately related, in fact, that you can’t have one without the other

When we pray, “Forgive us our sins,” what we are really doing is humbly acknowledging our *need* to be forgiven, and opening our hearts to *receive* forgiveness from God. It’s not that God is withholding forgiveness until we ask, or refusing to forgive us until we forgive others. The God of our gospel, whose nature Jesus reveals in the parable of the prodigal son, is extending forgiveness to all of us, all the time, without conditions.

Sometimes you hear people say, “Well, I believe that *God* has forgiven me, but I can’t forgive *myself*.” What they mean is that even though they believe in their heads that God has extended grace to them, they have not really been able to receive that truth into their hearts. They are still carrying around the weight of their past failures and disappointments, like Fouke with his heart full of stones.

I have known people like Fouke in my life---haven’t you? In fact, I have *been* Fouke from time to time: harsh and judgmental toward myself, and therefore just as harsh and judgmental toward everyone else. A critical spirit is a critical spirit, even when you try to cloak it with righteousness. An unforgiving heart is an unforgiving heart, whether it is directed inward to oneself, or outward to others. **Forgiveness is a grace that flows both ways, or it doesn’t flow at all.**

You can **see how these two phrases go together**, in our Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses (or sins, or wrongdoings)," and "as we (then, therefore) forgive those who trespass against us." A person who cannot *receive* God's forgiveness---that is, a person who cannot forgive themselves----is unlikely to be able to *extend* genuine forgiveness to others.

On the other hand, when we are *able* to receive God's forgiveness---when we allow ourselves to know that we are loved unconditionally by God, when we feel ourselves to be released from the pain of past mistakes, and freed to do things differently in the future than we have done before---then the healing waters of forgiveness can flow out from us toward others, and back again. Old wounds are tended; relationships are restored; and life goes forward.

So here is a question for us this morning. Granted that forgiveness is something that we all need, both to receive and to give; granted that we are miserable and stuck in a cycle of hurt and vengeance without it; granted that when Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," he is actually giving us something to *do*, pointing us in the direction of wholeness and life: **how do we go about it?** How can the healing power of forgiveness be released in our lives?

Our fable, "The Magic Eyes," offers some clues.

First, this observation. **Forgiveness is a choice.** Some people actively refuse to forgive, as a matter of principle, or because they are afraid of making themselves vulnerable to ever being hurt again. "I have been wronged," they insist, and they're right. But when we refuse to forgive, we miss the point that forgiveness is primarily for our own sake, not for the sake of the persons who have hurt us. The people we need to forgive may not know or agree that they need to be forgiven. They may not remember their offense. They may even be dead! It is we ourselves who need to do the letting go of past injury, in order to be healed, and enabled to live and love again.

Some people refuse to forgive---or to accept forgiveness---because they have become comfortable in the role of victim. I know a woman who said that she didn't want to forgive her mother for the emotional wounds of her childhood, because if she forgave her mother, she might have to give up the parts of her own identity that were formed around those wounds. The role of innocent victim had, in fact, become the largest, most cherished part of her identity. If I forgave my mother, she said, who would I be?

As the angel in our fable explains to Fouke, if he wants the magic eyes that will heal him of his pain, first he has to *want* to forgive his wife, even if he does not yet know how. Forgiveness begins only when we honestly and truly desire it, praying as Jesus taught us, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Forgiveness begins with a choice.

Secondly, **forgiveness is a process.** A zillion books have been written about this process, which, in shorthand form, goes like this: *we hurt, we hate, and we heal.* We *hurt*: that is, we allow ourselves to feel the depth of an injury that has been dealt to us, or

that we have inflicted. We don't deny it, minimize it, or try to sweep it under the rug. Then, we *hate*: that is, we name the offense, allow for our justified anger, and place the blame where it rightly belongs. Forgiveness does not mean condoning or excusing an injustice that has been done.

Finally, we *heal*. At some tender point in this process, we say to the one who has hurt us, "By all rights I should call it quits between us. Both my pride and my principles demand no less. However, though I make no guarantee that I will be able to forget what you have done, and although we both may carry the scars for a long time, I refuse to let this event control our future relationship. I will try to let go of the pain that is binding us to the past, and move on." Forgiveness---directed toward others or to ourselves, either way it's the same---is always a process. *We hurt, we hate, and we heal.*

And I want to emphasize that the process of forgiveness has its own life, much like the human processes of birth or grief. Like giving birth or grieving, forgiveness has its own timing, and goes at its own pace. Recall how the stones are lifted from Fouke's heart gradually? The process of forgiveness cannot be forced, but only embraced and lived, day by day by day.

Which brings us to one last observation. **Forgiveness is a habit.** It is not one isolated, momentous act. Forgiveness is like hunger. If you get hungry and eat a meal, your hunger will go away. But later on it will return. Eating once does not mean that you have "done" hunger, and giving or receiving forgiveness once does not mean that you have "done" forgiveness.

Remember what Jesus said to Peter, when Peter asked how many times he needed to forgive someone? Seven? "Not seven times," Jesus answered, "but seventy times seven." Which is to say: continually, Peter. Forgiveness is a way of life. Forgiveness becomes a habit, just as holding onto grievances can become a habit. Why else would Jesus teach us to make this our *daily* prayer and practice, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us?" He is teaching us to cultivate the habit of looking at ourselves, and at others, with the "magic eyes" of compassion.

As we practice seeing people with these magic eyes, we will gradually come to see the truth about ourselves, and about all people, including the ones who hurt us. The truth is: in this broken world, at one time or another, all of us will experience hurt at the hands of others. And all of us will inflict hurt, intentionally or otherwise, even on the people we love most. All of us are Fouke and all of us are Hilda, weak and fallible human beings, each with our own sorrows, pains and regrets, standing in need of forgiveness.

The proclamation of the gospel is that forgiveness has been given, breaking the cycle of hurt and vengeance, breaking the power of the past to determine the future. It's a gift from God that comes to us every day: as a choice to be made, a process to be embraced, a habit to be cultivated. The forgiveness we need, the forgiveness that can free us and make us whole, is ours for the asking, ours for the giving:

"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Amen.