

Matthew 6:5–15 (NRSV)

“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

“Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

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

And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

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

How Should We Pray

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: June 21, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Matthew 6:5–13

I am struck by the simplicity of the Lord's Prayer. Jesus instructs his disciples to pray to God, privately, not for show. He tells them not to strive for eloquence for heaped up words are all too often empty. He tells them to pray simply. God in heaven, may your name bring reverence and respect. May the way of living that is yours become ours on earth. Give us enough to eat. Forgive us our sins. Debts means sins here, not money we owe. We ask God to forgive our sins against others, which are also sins against God. And then keep us from temptation and trials, and save us from the ways of the evil one.

It is a beautiful prayer. It's no wonder that churches like ours repeat it almost every Sunday. It is simple yet profound. It is eloquent but not empty at all. It is comforting and lovely.

Like all the simple messages that Jesus teaches, though, it does have a bite. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us." There's this small conjunction smuggled in there, as. Forgive us as we have forgiven.

All of a sudden there comes a condition. We can pray for forgiveness only as we have forgiven. Verses 14 and 15 make it clear that Jesus means what he implies. "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." As the Bible commentator John Nolland says, "Though God prefers the coinage of mercy, he will deal with us in the coinage with which we have chosen to deal with others."¹

All of a sudden our bucolic prayer bares its teeth. The prayer makes a requirement of us, a requirement which, speaking for myself, may seem hard for us. Can the forgiveness we can expect from God really depend on our ability to forgive others? All of a sudden it seems the good news of the Gospel is not easy news.

Of course, forgiveness is no simple idea. If Pilate had been within earshot of this morning's instruction, he might well have asked Jesus, "Forgiveness? Just what is forgiveness?" just like he asked Jesus, "What is truth?" It's a good question, and the answer is not all that obvious.

I've heard people say that they are unwilling to forgive because it means saying that it's okay for people to do anything they want. Walk all over me. Make me a doormat. Not a problem. I forgive you. I'll pretend it never happened. Fred Buechner says that forgiving is saying that no matter how unspeakable it is what you've done to me, I will not let it stand between us. But saying it that way also sounds like being a doormat.

On the other extreme some say that they will forgive, but they will not forget. But here it's hard to be sure where they draw the line between the two, forgiving and forgetting. Maybe it

¹ Nolland John, "Preface," in *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 291.

means simply that they will not seek revenge but that trust and warmth are gone forever. But that hardly seems the kind of forgiveness we would want to receive from God.

This last week Dylann Roof hatefully murdered unarmed, innocent church members at a prayer meeting Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The friends and family members offered forgiveness to Roof. Many of us might have a hard time forgiving in their shoes, no matter what forgiveness means. But what did they mean when they said they forgave Dylann Roof. It is clear that these brave souls did not mean that what Roof did was alright and that they would be glad to free him and give him his gun back so he could keep doing it. It didn't mean that they would forgive him but continue to hold a grudge against him, either. When they said they forgave him, they meant that they refused to let hate dominate them. They want to see justice, but they refuse to hate. Refusing to hate in the face of hateful trespasses may be as good a definition of forgiveness as I can think of. It may not be easy to do, but it's not stupid. This kind of forgiveness acknowledges and fights against injustice and hurt, but it does not sink to meanness and vengefulness. This kind of forgiveness is not just a pious response. In fact, it's a very smart one, for they understand that hatred can only sow hatred. They recognize that our souls become brittle when they are filled with hate. Filled with hate our souls can feel no love going out or coming in. The bitter heart cannot experience being forgiven. We can only hope to know the feeling of being forgiven as we ourselves have forgiven, simply because only in not hating can one actually feel love.

Originally for this Father's Day sermon I had planned to focus on the simple desires that the Lord's Prayer evokes. It focuses on the important things in life. Enough to eat, but not gluttony. Hope for God's realm to come. Kind relationships. And these are all important things, central to the prayer Jesus taught us to say.

But then came Wednesday night in Charleston. And somehow it no longer seemed possible not to focus on hatred. The friends and relatives of those eight wonderful, praying people refused to hate, and they are an inspiration to us. But they also require that we look squarely into the hate that brought about the massacre in the first place, hate that is so corrosive in our world, and especially hate that is so corrosive in our country.

In America we like to believe that we are unlike any other people. Al Qaida and Isis, they are terrorists filled with hate. Hamas and Hezbollah, they are terrorists filled with hate. The U. S. State Department lists sixty such organizations as terrorist hate groups. Hatemongering terrorists commit such atrocities as the 9/11 attacks, the Charlie Hebdo attacks and even domestically the Oklahoma City bombing. But crimes in the United States against African American people are far less frequently characterized as hatemongering terrorism. Instead the media wonder what made Dylann Roof snap, to lose his mind. They see the massacre to be perpetrated by a sick misguided individual. Oh sure, he was hateful, but he was sick, an anomaly, an outlier, they say. Jeb Bush on Friday said, "I don't know what was on the mind or the heart of the man who committed these atrocious crimes." Rick Santorum claimed the massacre was an "assault on religious liberty." Bobby Jindal said, "I don't think we'll ever know what was going on in his mind."

Why the difference? Why were Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols terrorists while Dylann Roof was just a sick individual? Is it because in America hatred of black people is acceptable? Is it because if the attack in Charleston were to be called terrorism black lives would have to matter as much in people's minds as white lives? Is it because to call the murder of black people terrorism would require us to acknowledge the pervasiveness, nature and acceptability of racial hatred? Is it because it would require us to look on the campaign trail, in the halls of

congress, on the court bench, in the state houses and in the media and find that hatred lives there masquerading in garments of respectability, hatred that incites and promotes nothing short of terrorism?

There is something deep in the American psyche that fails to grasp the pervasiveness and corrosiveness of racism, something that lets racist symbols and rhetoric stand when other symbols and rhetoric would be unacceptable. A Confederate flag flying in Charleston is allowed as an expression of free speech and a fond reminder of the days of slavery. How long do we suppose a proudly flying black and white Isis flag would be tolerated at the State House? In 2008 the United States elected its first black president, and every day of his term it has been acceptable to say that his presidency, even his citizenship is illegitimate. On President Obama's very first day in office it was acceptable for former Vice President Cheney to pretend to need a wheelchair at the inauguration so he wouldn't have to stand and acknowledge respect for the President. It has been acceptable for the President's congressional opposition to spend the last seven years with but one major goal, to make his administration fail. It has been acceptable to hate him. And the unspoken reason (or at least it's mostly unspoken), the reason that all of this is acceptable is because he is black, and it is acceptable to hate black people, even a sitting President.

The wound of racism cuts to the bone. Its legacy of quasi-legitimized hate is corrosive to the core. There may be no greater threat to either the soul or the security of our great nation.

There is no little irony that the people of a black church in Charleston, South Carolina, a black church devastated by the wages of racist hatred, there is no little irony that these torn and grieving people are showing the rest of the country what it means to refuse to hate. And in turn they are showing the rest of the country the way to recover its soul. We are forgiven, but we will be able to take in that forgiveness only as we ourselves have forgiven. We are loved, but we will be able to take in that love only as we ourselves have loved. Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Keep us from hate that we might experience the fullness of love that you have for us. Amen.