

Our

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This is the second week of my 3- week long sermon series about the Lord' Prayer. We say these words each week in our service, and I am always amazed at the depth, the beauty, and the richness of this prayer.

My hope in spending all this time on such a short prayer is that week by week these familiar words will take on even greater meaning to us, and as we say this prayer together it will provide us both the comfort of it's familiarity, but also the opportunity for new insight and growth.

Last Sunday, we noticed together how simple this prayer is. That it does not contain any complex words or images. It is a simple prayer. The prayer of a carpenters son. Meant for ordinary people.

A sign to us also that God does not care if our prayers are beautiful, and in fact prefers that they are not too showy. Don't make it too complicated. Just the basics.

When I was a kid, our church bulletin did not write out the text to the Lord's Prayer, instead assuming that everyone just knew it. But there was always this cryptic phrase in parenthesis next to the Lord's Prayer in the bulletin. It simply said Lord's Prayer (Using Debts).

Now most of my extended family is Roman Catholic, so I understood from a young age why this distinction was important, getting out of sync with everyone else at christenings and first communions always made me feel a bit like I didn't belong.

And about every time I do a funeral or a wedding here, there are some who say forgive us our trespasses or forgive us our sins, instead of forgive us our debts. Actually, I have messed it up a few times before since the last church I served was staunchly a 'trespasses' community.

The good news for all of us, no matter which word we use, is that none of us are wrong.

The confusion here goes all the way back to the Bible itself, which contains the Lord's Prayer both in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

In The Gospel of Matthew Jesus says: "Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." The greek word is ὀφείλημα (oph - el - eh - mah) which means, something owed, a due, a debt. a delinquency.

The idea behind this image is that as humans we are born owing something to one another and we owing something to God. These are not debts like a mortgage or a

credit card that can be paid off in time, rather the basic condition of being human is that we have a responsibility to each other that we cannot be relieved of. We owe each other respect, we owe each other dignity. Further, being a Christian means understanding that we are responsible not only for what happens to us, but for what happens to our neighbors. We are accountable for what happens to the vulnerable people in our society.

And we owe God something to. We owe God our gratitude, we owe God our participation in making the world a better place than it was before.

And most of us are delinquent on a lot of those debts.

Rather than look out for one another we close our blinds, avert our eyes, or cross to the other side of the road.

Rather than meeting each person as a child of God, we meet the stranger with suspicion and fear.

Rather than thanking God, we delude ourselves into believing that the richness of our lives is merely the fruit of our own individual excellence.

We are not asking God to take away our responsibility, but rather to forgive us for failing to meet our responsibilities.

And the prayer equally calls us to forgive our debtors. That is to forgive those who are delinquent in their responsibilities to us. Those who have let us down, and to forgive the ways people have left us high and dry.

And so we pray, Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

The Gospel of Luke (which we read last week) on the other hand renders the prayer this way:

Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

So debts is still in there in the second half, same word as before. But it begins by asking God to forgive our sins. Here the greek word is ἁμαρτία (ha - mar - tee - a). In the singular form it does quite simply mean, a mistake, a failure, or a missed opportunity. But in the plural form, sins, as it appears here, it means something bigger. It connotes a more chronic condition.

Not merely the sum of many failings, but a state of being in which, to borrow a phrase from the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, our very lives have become unmanageable but for God. So in Luke's version of the prayer, we are not merely admitting that we have done some things wrong this week. Rather we are confessing that we seem chronically unable to live the way God wants us to. It's actually quite

similar to the debt image, in that it admits an ongoing inability to meet the expectations that God has for us in terms of how we live in this world and how we treat one another.

And so we pray, forgive us our sins.

Now, trespasses is the biggest stretch because it does not appear in either version of the prayer. However, you may have noticed in this morning's reading that after the prayer, Jesus goes on to say "if you forgive others their trespasses, God will also forgive you." So it is not in the prayer, but it is nearby. It made its way into the prayer in common usage because a very influential early Christian writer, Origen of Alexandria, copied the prayer using trespasses a couple hundred years after Jesus' death. It is not really clear why he made that choice, but it made its way into several influential prayer books and the rest of his history.

In this case the word is παράπτωμα (para - ptooma), which is a compound word literally meaning to step across, or to step beyond. Although this is not in the original prayer in either Gospel, it is a scriptural image, so I want to give it a brief word.

Here the image is somewhat different than the previous two. Where debts and sins are rooted in a sense that we have obligations to one another and to God. Trespasses indicates that there are boundaries around behavior that we are not to step beyond. The image here is that God has drawn a circle around human behavior separating the acceptable from the unacceptable, and we need to ask forgiveness for the times that we step out of those bounds.

And so, with that image in mind, we might pray, forgive us our trespasses.

So that is where each of these images come from, and some of what they mean. And if you are wondering which one is right? The truth is, any of them could be (although I think trespasses is probably the least right since it is not in the original text).

I think each of these images tells something true about the actions we need forgiveness for, and the condition we need God to help us from. Each reminds us of something we must remember. That we owe something to God, and to each other. That we cannot manage our lives without God. And that there are certain boundaries that we simply should not cross.

But no matter what version of the prayer you say, or which one you grew up with, or which one you just like better. There is one word in this prayer that never changes. I have seen so many different translations of this prayer, different creative ways of expressing its core ideas, communicating its simple beauty.

And everyone of them has one word in common: Our.

Our Father

Our Mother

Our Everloving and Holy God

Our daily bread.
Our food for today.

Our debts.
Our sins.
Our trespasses.

No matter what version, this prayer is always collective. It is always our.

No one prays “give me today my daily bread.” It feels weirdly even saying it.

We don't say my God. Our even my sins.

Its our.

Always our. And stretch your vision about who that our is. It's not just us in this room.
Or us in this country. Or even just us Christians.

The indispensable, immovable truth of this prayer is that all of us, all of humanity, we are all in this together. This prayer is not just about the state of our individual relationship with God but the state of our collective relationship with God and with all of creation.

If I am well-fed, but my neighbor has gone to bed hungry I pray “give us our bread.”

Even if I gave a few bucks to a man on the streets this week, so long as we live in a world that tolerates poverty, we pray, “forgive us our debts.”

And should I ever be tempted to believe that God is on my side against someone else, I would be chastened quickly by praying to “Our God.”

This prayer makes our common humanity unmistakable. Even if you or I say a different word here or there, it is always our prayer.

That's the word that cannot change.

Sins, that's fine, as long as it's our sins.
Trespasses, sure, as long as they are our trespasses.
Debts, absolutely, but our debts.

Our need. Our life. Our world. Our God.

Our prayer.