September 13th, 2020

Springfield Presbyterian Church

I’m Not Even Sure Anymore What Season We Are In.

The 187th Day of March

**Mercies Upon Mercies**

1. The Lord’s Prayer

 Every Sunday morning, in our time of prayer, we say the prayer that our Savior, Jesus Christ, taught us to pray: the Lord’s Prayer. It is a prayer that we hold above the rest, and certainly it is a prayer that unifies many of us from different traditions, households, or cultures across the spectrum. For many, it is a prayer that they learned as a young child, perhaps kneeling at the bedside, praying in unison with a parent figure as they learned these words so carefully.

 That, at least, is my relationship to this prayer. I still remember one night when my grandmother was staying at our house. I was a little girl who crawled out of her bed after bedtime and my grandmother had her bedroom door open. Instead of telling me to get back to bed or yelling for my mom, she quietly ushered me in. She picked me up, put her in the bed with her, and she and I said the Lord’s Prayer. Or, she said it – and I probably tied together some words. Then she told me to go back to bed, and I did. I still remember thinking that she was the coolest grandma ever because she didn’t tell on me to mom or yell, but she held me snuggly in her arms during the prayer.

 The prayer is one that I have now said all of my life – as if time stands still, because the prayer remains the same. Yet one of the struggles I’ve experienced is that the words now flow out of me so normally, that I completely forget what I’m saying. I’ve lost, to some extent, the gravity of the words we speak. One day, some day, we should do an intensive study of the prayer together, but the line I want to pull out today is this one, “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

II. Debts and Debtors

 I really like the first part of that sentence, you know, the one where God forgives me of all my sin and I’m washed clean and all is well. But in the same sentence, you and I are given the challenge: forgive debts as you’ve been forgiven.

 Anyone else want to quickly roll to the next line of the prayer? Let’s just forget it happened? Because forgiveness is hard, it requires feelings that are often uncomfortable and it requires a humility to recognize our own sin as we see others.

 The parable this morning is all about forgiveness, but more so, about mercy. Peter asks how often he should forgive, and Jesus, as per usual, challenges him and us in saying we need to forgive more. The parable he then uses as a teaching aid, points to the same truth: if your master is going to give you mercy, then you need to be merciful to one another...and if you aren’t, why would you even claim yourself as a Christ follower?

 For me, the first step in all of this is to admit that I am not a perfect human, that I’ve had to ask for forgiveness or mercy more than once, or twice, of fifteen times in my life. I have no doubt that tomorrow, or the next day, in the next year, and in the rest of my life – there will be plenty of times for me to lean into humility and ask for mercy. And chances are, I won’t like it. I don’t think it ever feels good to be the one to ask for forgiveness – because you are putting your vulnerability on the line, you are humbling yourself, and you are facing the reality that you’ve done something wrong that you need to own up to in this life.

 In those experiences where I’ve asked for forgiveness and I’ve received true mercy – mercy that doesn’t shame or guilt me, mercy that doesn’t claim I am less than I am, or mercy that lets me start again – that mercy is incredible. That mercy is the kind that makes you remember a loving God and the space for grace in this world. The mercy frees you, lets you live without a burden on your back. Mercy is every ounce of forgiveness that we do not deserve, but happily and gracefully accept.

III. The Other Way

 The reality of life is that because I’ve received mercy, I have to show mercy to those as well. When someone asks genuinely for my forgiveness, for me to be flexible or gentle, or to humbly admits the ways in which they’ve hurt me...I’m called to show mercy.

 Now, there’s an incredibly important caveat that cannot be missed in this passage...you are not called to show mercy to the point of self-destruction nor to the point of abuse. When someone asks for forgiveness for abusing you...can you forgive them? Must you? Well, that’s a longer conversation and somewhat contextual, but any forgiveness that promotes repeated injury or abuse is not what Jesus is asking us to do. When someone offers a half-hearted ask for forgiveness, do you need to forgive them? No, you can ask for them to be genuine and authentic about their sin, and hold them to accountability. When someone pleads for forgiveness, but then continues to do those things that injure or harm – you are not called to forgive them. I cannot say this enough – mercy and forgiveness does not encourage, endorse, or affirm abuse, injury, or harm of any time.

 Yet when someone genuinely asks my forgiveness, in a state of humility, just as Christ has forgiven me, I am able to give the gift of mercy. Again, I do not have to say, “Oh, it’s no big deal” or make it less than it is, but when I’m able to genuinely say, “I forgive you.” And when I’m able to affirm that humility, I think the gift is greater, like when I can say, “I’m thankful that you came to me.” It’s through these acts of mercy, both given to us and through us, that we are a people who are better crafted for authentic community.

IV. The Call to Community

 And I like to think that’s what this is all about, if we are in places where we cannot forgive or others cannot accept our forgiveness, like gorilla glue, we are stuck in place. We cannot cultivate deeper relationships, conversations are static and stagnant, and we are unable to grow. This is not a good place for anyone to be, because as forgiver or forgiven, we are bolder people and without forgiveness, the world and the way in which we view it is often under the lens of scrutiny and bitterness.

 So, who are you going to make contact with this week? If we really want to put value into what we say as we say the Lord’s prayer, when we say ‘forgive us as we forgive our debtors” – how are you going to begin that work today? Who is someone you need to ask forgiveness? And is there someone who has asked forgiveness of you, but you have been unwilling or unable to step into mercy?

 The opportunity is alive, and when we offer and share those gifts of grace and mercy, as we receive or give forgiveness, we find that our lives are more in line with the teachings of Christ. And perhaps, bigger picture, our lives are more enriched because we are able to be with one another in new, and more vulnerable and authentic ways as a community serving our loving and forgiving God. Amen.