

As We Forgive

One day, an employee at a tool-and-die company in Indiana spent \$30 for a few pieces of used furniture and an old painting of some flowers and decided to strategically hang the picture to cover up a hole in the wall that had been bugging him.

Some years later he was playing a board game called Masterpiece in which players attempt to outbid one another for artwork at an auction. Much to his surprise, one of the cards in the game featured a painting of flowers that looked a lot like the one he had on his wall. He found that his painting was similar in style to the work of Martin Johnson Heade, an American still-life artist best known for landscapes and flower arrangements.

He asked the Kennedy Galleries in Manhattan, which handles many of Heade's works, to take a look at his painting. They verified that the piece of artwork covering the hole in his wall was a previously unknown Heade painting, since named "Magnolias on Gold Velvet Cloth." In 1999, The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston purchased the painting for \$1.2 million dollars.

"Magnolias on Gold Velvet Cloth" was a treasure hiding in plain sight. During this Lenten season, we are going to be spending time with another treasure hiding in plain sight. This one is called, "The Lord's Prayer." Most of us are able to rattle off the Lord's Prayer without even thinking about it. And that's the problem. So we are going to attempt to move the Lord's Prayer from our mouths where we speak the words, back into our hearts where we believe these words, and back to our minds so we understand what a treasure this prayer really is.

On this Ash Wednesday, we're going to jump right into the beating heart of the Lord's Prayer, where Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We sit here today with a sign of death on our foreheads, a visible reminder of the paycheck we get for sin. Those ashes preach: "You're another day closer to your grave." That's pretty dark stuff. It gets darker. Those ashes preach: "That grave there...it's your fault." And I know it's true. I don't have to be convinced I'm full of sin. Do you? Lent takes us to this dark place.

But Lent also says that there is Someone who has come and entered that darkness. In fact this Someone, the Son of God, entered a darkness that was deeper than physical death. He entered the pitch blackness of a broken relationship with God the Father. And why did he do it? He did it to switch places with you. That grave there is my fault. True. But Jesus has forgiven my fault. He has forgiven your fault. Jesus came and entered the deepest darkness to bring you out into the light. He takes your guilt and gives you his innocence. The cross is where that was all worked out. What an exchange!

So in this prayer of his, Jesus teaches you to ask for this forgiveness, this grace. Why? There is no other basis on which we can approach God! There is no such thing as saying, "Of course I can approach God, I'll show Him my resume; show him how good I've been; show Him how I've behaved and he'll have to accept me." No such thing. Scripture says "By deeds of the law shall no man be justified." You cannot create your own "not guilty" verdict through good

behavior. You can only plead for mercy. "Forgive us our trespasses" is that plea. And forgiven you are, because Jesus was convicted instead of you, sentenced instead of you, and took the fall instead of you. And then, the greatest miracle of all...He returned to life after being executed like a criminal! He rose to wipe away every sign of death! That grave there is my fault, but not only did Jesus forgive me my fault; one day Jesus will hold that grave open as I leave it behind, risen just like he is risen. "Forgive us our trespasses" indeed, so that this can be our future!

But in the present, there is a challenge. Jesus' prayer says, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Our Lord assumes two things. He assumes we need this forgiveness. And he assumes, having received this forgiveness, we will be forgiving. Does he assume too much?

As you wrestle with that, I'd like to share this story with you, from Corrie Ten Boom's book "Tramp for the Lord." In the book she tells how, after World War II, she met a guard who had been her captor in a concentration camp where her sister had died. He came forward after she spoke at a church gathering and said he had been a guard at Ravensbruck, and reached out his hand to her, asking her for forgiveness.

Corrie remembers how she hesitated, remembering how cruel he had been to her and her sister and so many others. Then she recalled Jesus' radical words about forgiveness. She prayed silently, "Jesus, help me...I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

And suddenly, she said, she could feel God's power coursing through her hand and out to the former guard. "I forgive you, brother!" she cried, with all her heart. She said that she had never known God's love so powerfully as she did at that moment.

Now there's really only two reactions to that: either you think, "Yes! That's exactly the kind of miraculous love that has saved me." Or you think, "I could never do something like that." If you're thinking "I could never do something like that," I don't know what to tell you, except Jesus assumes that if you have been forgiven by him, you will be forgiving like him. And as the example of Corrie Ten Boom demonstrates, it's really not about you forgiving someone, it's about asking Jesus to create that in you. It's about asking Jesus to flood you with forgiveness to the degree that that it spills out.

Forgiving those who trespass against you is only going to happen if you let Jesus melt your heart. His cross is like a bonfire. The closer you get, the warmer you become. The longer you look at this incredible sacrifice, the hotter it gets, until his love melts your heart and it cracks open, and mercy and love can get in there. Then, finally, the forgiveness Jesus pours into you becomes the fuel for a whole new way of life. Don't you want that? You can have that. You can fill up on that every time you pray with heart and mind engaged: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."