

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, July 24, 2016

Genesis 18:20-32

Then the Lord said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know."

So the men turned from there, and went towards Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it."

Luke 11:1-13

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Let us pray...Amen.

When Betsy and I got engaged, we knew right away that we would need to join a church. Both of us grew up in churches, me in the North Haven Congregational Church, and Betsy in the Church of the Incarnation Episcopal Church. I knew I would be headed to seminary, and one of the requirements for ordination is membership in a local church.

We visited a UCC church on the west side of Rochester, Union Congregational United Church of Christ, in Churchville, NY, where Rev. Roger Reed was pastor. In our first worship service there, Roger lead the congregation in the Lord's Prayer, reassuring us that we should pray it the way we know it best, even if it's different from the way our neighbor prays it, because God is in the mumbling.

This made such an impression on me that I use that line to this day. But did you even stop to wonder why there are different versions in the first place?

Luke uses sins and indebtedness, Matthew debts and debtors...trespasses is not in either form. So where did trespasses come from?

Well, it came from one of the translators commissioned to translate the bible from Greek. See, those who translate have tremendous power to shape the bible with the words they choose. There are many examples of how the King James translator used words from that time that forever altered the meaning of God's Holy Word, and not always for the better! This, too, is an example of the translation changing the meaning of a really important prayer.

So what's the big deal with using trespasses? Most everybody does these days. One critique of the use of trespasses is that most people in the world aren't property owners. How can this prayer have meaning to someone if they don't own any property? How can one trespass against another if they don't own any property? How can one forgive another's trespasses if they don't own property to trespass on?

My Uncle Doug, recently retired pastor of First Parish Saco, in Saco Maine, uses debts, because everybody incurs debts, whether or not they own property.

Another colleague of mine uses sins, because, of course, we are all sinners, sinned against, and in need of forgiveness of our sins.

Now, you may have noticed that at least once in most of my sermons, I take a moment to remind the congregation that I believe we are not meant to read the bible literally. That we are meant to take the bible seriously, but that it was written in metaphorical language, and was intended to be used symbolically in our daily lives. That's why the bible remains relevant to God's faithful children, because as metaphor, the Word of God has infinite uses and meanings in our lives. As literal instruction, the Word of God falls short in the modern world.

So it would be ok if some of you were thinking, ok Gary, you're so big on God's Word as metaphor, so why don't you use the trespasses version of the Lord's Prayer as a metaphor, and stop worrying about whether someone owns property or not?!

Fair enough. I'm willing to accept the common use of 'trespasses' in our daily use of the Lord's prayer, as long as those of us who use it are willing to keep in mind the symbolic way we trespass against our brothers and sisters, even those who have no property to protect.

So that brings us to the congregational participation part of today's sermon! Would you be willing to say out loud some of the ways that we trespass against our neighbors, not in a literal 'climb over the fence' way, but in a symbolic way?

Interrupting someone

Lying

Bullying

Teasing

Putdowns

Violating personal boundaries (Physical, or emotional) Bubble of Space

Abuse of any kind

Neglect of any kind

Discrimination of any kind

Reflecting on the different ways we trespass against another can also lead to our reflecting on the different ways we have been trespassed against. And I believe that when we hold these kinds of trespasses in our hearts, when we remember these things we have listed, our prayer becomes deeper, and more meaningful.

My hope and my prayer is that every time you pray the Lord's Prayer from now on, you remember, even for a fleeting second, the metaphor of trespassing that goes beyond walking onto someone else's property. Even as we are singing the Lord's Prayer on days that we celebrate Communion, I hope we will remember this conversation.

My hope and my prayer is that if you recognize a behavior on the list of trespasses we built together, that you'll try not to do that anymore, while at the same time, forgiving those who do those things to you.

And if sins, and debts, and trespasses are all metaphors, then we can, in fact, comfortably and appropriately use all those words interchangeably when we pray. Especially if we keep the various meanings in our hearts as we pray.

Amen.