

Psalm 85

¹LORD, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

²You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin. Selah

³You withdrew all your wrath; you turned from your hot anger.

⁴Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us.

⁵Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger to all generations?

⁶Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you?

⁷Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation.

⁸Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

⁹Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

¹⁰Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

¹¹Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.

¹²The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.

¹³Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.

Luke 11:1-13

11 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."² He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.³ Give us each day our daily bread.⁴ And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."⁵ 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;⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.'⁷ 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.'⁸ 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.⁹" So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?¹³ 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!"

One more story from our youth Mission Trip:

We were driving down a Detroit street; Tara, myself, Hailey and Jordyn. It was one of those bright sunny days and Tara offered for us to return to the Second Mile Center to donate some of the toys we'd found from the horrendous closet we cleaned out the day before. It was a wonderful idea...we had the time, the motivation, and we were in Detroit to help.

As we travelled along some rough terrain (and I am not talking about potholes) but rough neighborhoods, I noticed a group of young men sitting on their porch. Usually the people sitting and looking out were elderly. But this was a group just hanging out, and who knows if they were in a gang or not. Contrast that with what looked to be a mother walking her daughter to school. At least that's what it seemed. The girl, maybe 10, was wearing a plaid uniform carrying a backpack. Being the middle of summer, it caught me off guard.

I wondered if their daily prayer was "Lord, keep us safe."

Or, are they are praying for something quite different. How would I know? Was I projecting my own discomfort onto them? Do they pray for something different?

Ann Lamott says we have two kinds of prayer:

Thank you, thank you! and

Help me, help me, help me.

I would add that we have two other kinds of prayer:

Why? or How Long, O Lord? And

How can I help?

When we pray with Jesus, or attempt to pray like Jesus, we need to listen for how we might change our own ways to be more like Jesus.

When we pray to God, do we linger a bit on the “help me” part of prayer, focusing in on our own needs...and then giving thanks when we have our daily needs met? Do we take the initiative and travel with Jesus to the next part of prayer, asking for God’s will, and forgiving others their debts **to us** as God forgives our sins?

What are the ways we keep people indebted to us? Do we take account of what someone owes us...either time or money or gifts or thank you’s...or do we let that go? If we are the type to keep lists of what people owe us...does that mean we don’t really believe in a God who completely forgives us our sins?

If we were to simply let go of all people “owe” us...might we be freer to move in the direction of God’s loving and willing servants? Are we ready to stop being accountants?

Hasn’t Jesus given the most anyone could give, and on our behalf?

Do we pray to God for a fresh start and at the same time forgive others' debts to us?

There are many news stories now about financial advisors helping American families to reduce their debt, pay off credit cards, save money and live within their means. It is a hopeful sign that people are choosing to address the issues that a consumeristic culture has perpetuated...that we are **what we buy** or **have** or **seem to have** even if we go in great debt to look like we have a lot.

We can hardly forgive someone's debt to us if we are heavily in debt to family for loans, banks for loans, credit card companies for interest and penalties, schools for debt, insurance companies...the list goes on.

Jesus meant for us to consider the financial needs of the poor. He spoke more about wealth and poverty than what we might call "faith" and "spirituality." For Jesus, poverty was a spiritual issue. And those who Jesus wanted to follow him were meant to analyze just how they would help to make life worth living for the least among us.

How can we forgive the debts of others when we ourselves carry heavy burdens? And, if we are willing to change patterns of buying and

shopping so that we get what we can afford; and if we can reduce our debts to others; maybe we'll be able to consider ways to teach and help others to live within their means.

Do you know this past week, within just two days, I received five phone calls for people needing help with bills and food. We had one twenty dollar food card left which the Deacons make available to our staff for such needs. I mailed it out. The very next call was from a man asking for cash to pay for two nights in a hotel room. I told him I didn't give money away and he said "well, can you just write me a check?"

We keep a list of people we've helped with names and addresses. I always refer people to Troy People Concerned, United Way and the Salvation Army, because I know these ministries also keep track and know the aliases some people use. They have more resources than I do. If people are willing to use those resources, it means they are trying to manage their lives better. I refer them and hope their persistence helps them to see the need for greater help than cash for just one night.

It seemed a bit strange to me that so many calls happened in just a short time, I felt like maybe there was a group of people who were

alerting their friends, “hey, call First in Troy, they mail out food cards!”
Were they all in the same room, or am I just paranoid?

Jesus did tell people “ask and you shall receive.”

We have people who will bring me groceries to give away, and that is what I prefer, giving a bag of food away, similar to what Tara shared last week when she bought a Chicago man a meal at Subway.

On my preaching trip to Nashville, I saw a poster downtown which was produced by several organizations and homeless shelters. It read:

“Don’t give your money to the homeless. Support a local shelter, which provides food, shelter and opportunities for rehab and work. We are working to change behavior and help people get off the streets. Cash can be used for many purposes and can perpetuate and enable abuse of drugs, alcohol and illegal activities. Please, support your local shelters and homeless ministries instead!”

There are a lot of ways to follow Jesus, to pray with Jesus. And every day teaches me something new about myself and how God wants us to

care for one another. Jesus teaches that caring for one another means evaluating the debts we have created and the debts others have. We are more free to support ministries of care and compassion when we have created space in our own budgets to help places that do the hard work we cannot...paying social workers to be involved in changing lives, paying counselors to help parents and communities change for the better, and helping communities to begin anew.

As Sarah Dylan Breuer says in her Lectionary Blog:

The "forgiveness" we are invited to extend to others is not a personal well-wishing; it is changing the material circumstances of the poor such that they and their families no longer teeter on the brink of disaster, but can earn their living by their work. And we as Jesus' followers are taught to ask God to extend mercy toward us in our sin precisely to the degree that we extend mercy toward others with our wealth and our power.

We give to agencies and churches, to non-for-profits so God may use what God has given to us to help others. And we do so with the faith that every little bit matters.

God has blessed this world, and we are called to be good stewards of those blessings. Each time I mail out a gift card, I include a scripture passage and short note. I hope this reminds them God is with them, and is answering part of their prayer. At least, that's how I feel.

Have you ever asked God for something and then what you received was more than you ever imagined? Maybe you asked God for a friend, and you not only have a trustworthy friend, but they have helped you grow spiritually?

Have you ever asked God for something, told no one else about it, and received what you needed through more than one source?

Our God is generous compared to the tendency we have of being tightfisted. The challenge of praying like Jesus is to become more generous in our giving to those we might believe are less deserving. But we are also challenged to learn and make informed decisions; to try to make the systems better so that everyone can have safe places to learn; so that children walking to school with their moms meet their intended destinations without harm; so that the financial debts do not weigh down the soul; so that our lives are transformed and we have made room to bless others.

The reason I showed an image during worship of a person walking a labyrinth (and some of you have experienced that here) is because we can have one idea of what we might experience in a walking prayer time, we go into the circle, but then, God might have another thought for us to pray and consider, and we emerge different or changed in some way.

Like a labyrinth, prayer invites us into a time to be with God, to embrace mystery and newness, so go and seek, ask and knock for God's goodness...and be the ones freely sharing what you experience as God's goodness.

Amen.