

“Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” This is where the Lord’s Prayer gets difficult, I think. When I was in high school and sang in the church choir, I sat next to a college student in the alto section, and I would always hear her insert this little extra bit in: “Forgive us our debts as we *should* forgive our debtors.” That shows admirable self-knowledge, doesn’t it? She knew good and well that she didn’t forgive everyone she should, but she prayed for her own forgiveness because she knew she needed it.

John Dominic Crossan has an intriguing take on this petition of the Lord’s Prayer. He says that by beginning the prayer “Our *Father*,” we cast God as the ultimate householder, and ourselves as members of the household. Therefore the prayer is about household economics, and in God’s household, everybody gets what they need. Debt, of course, literal debt, was often a condition of radical economic inequality, when the poorest had no other way to make ends meet sometimes than to borrow until they had to sell themselves as slaves, while the wealthy had much more than they needed. Crossan says that the Lord’s Prayer portrays God’s alternative household—“your will be done on earth as in heaven”—in which debt is forgiven and everyone is free.

This is compelling. God’s household stands in stark contrast to the kingdom of Caesar. And believe me, I have plenty to say about the destructive effects of debt. But honestly, I don’t understand how this reading makes sense of asking *God* to forgive our debts. God doesn’t hold debts; creditors in Caesar’s kingdom do. I just couldn’t do anything with that concept, though I’d love to hear anybody here take it on another Sunday.

I think this is about forgiveness in general, I really do. The philosopher Hannah Arendt, in her book *The Human Condition*, writes, "Without being . . . released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell" (p. 237). People tend to react to vicious or damaging actions by escalating, so that one violence begets a greater violence. Only forgiveness can interrupt the cycle.

Forgiving does not mean forgetting. The most memorable exhibit for me at the Gerald Ford Presidential Museum is the one about Ford's pre-emptive pardon of Richard Nixon, which he thought was necessary in order for the nation to move on from Watergate. Au contraire, as the exhibit suggests, many public servants and private citizens found their trust in government undermined as Ford did away with any possible accountability for Nixon. We could not forget; we could not pretend it had never happened. The pardon for unspecified and unacknowledged crimes contributed to a sense of unaccountability and self-dealing in our government that continues to this day.

When apartheid had been abolished in South Africa, and a new administration established, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission did not issue a broad amnesty for everyone who may have been involved in the systemic injustice that was apartheid. They would only consider amnesty on an individual basis for people who applied for it with respect to a particular crime, and would agree to speak the truth publicly. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, "Unless we look the beast

in the eye we find it has an uncanny habit of returning to hold us hostage." Memory is the only way to prevent atrocity from happening again. Going forward into a new future means going back to recover the memory of past injustices. Forgiving is not forgetting.

I read an interesting reflection by a woman who had been raped and, of course, struggled with what it meant to forgive the rapist. Ultimately she decided that forgiveness would be to her benefit, that carrying the injury around was hurting her. I would note here that it was her decision, and it came from a place of strength. Nothing about forgiveness implies that you should accept abuse, ever. But having been wronged in a devastating way, she came to a sense that not forgiving her assailant hurt her more than him. However, she said, although she had forgiven him, she did not have to trust him. "Believe me," she said, "I don't. I am working to love him *as my enemy*."

Isn't that fascinating? It honestly had not occurred to me, but when Jesus says to love your enemy, he doesn't say to make the enemy your friend. You can have enemies; you just have to love them. And that might mean simply not doing anything malicious to them, or it might mean seeking accountability from them for their own sake, or it might mean trying to see them with God's eyes. It doesn't mean trusting them if they are not trustworthy. "Love," writes Martha Stortz of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, "is a gesture of defiance in a world that threatens to implode in hatred." Love is a gesture of defiance in a world that threatens to implode in hatred. Love can recognize reality when wrong has been done, but it does not let the wrong control what happens next.

A medieval legend about the disciple Judas illustrates the reach of divine reconciliation. The canonical biblical texts present Judas as a tragic example of the power of guilt. His deed brought him censure from his friends, ridicule from the temple hierarchy, and overwhelming isolation. Alone and miserable, Judas watched events that he had set in motion now spin out of his control. He could no longer live with himself. Crushed by the weight of his crime, Judas hung himself in a potter's field. The biblical story ends in suicide, but this legend keeps the cameras rolling. According to this legend, Jesus descended into hell after his crucifixion. There he remembered Judas. Jesus sought him out among the lost souls in hell in order to unburden him. Jesus found Judas in order to remember—and to forgive. Forgiveness becomes a ministry of re-membering—literally, a reintegration of all things into a new whole. [Martha Stoltz, *Word & World*, January 1, 2007]

Forgiveness is central to Jesus' worldview; that's why it's in the Lord's Prayer. Forgiveness is the way we re-member—put back together—the broken pieces of one another, ourselves, our communities. A communion song by Joe Wise goes like this:

Take and eat, this is my body, broken on crosses too lonely to mention.  
Take and drink, this is my blood; spilled in your alleys and lost in your hallways.  
Re-member me, re-member me.

Take and eat, this is my gift, myself, given in love in the face of rejection.  
Take and drink, this is my life. Know it's my pledge now to be with you always.  
**Re-member me, re-member me.**

The poet plays on the double meaning of remember: recall/don't forget, and put back together. Re-member me.

Jesus accepts breakage, if you will, in order to show that after breakage is mending, re-membering, resurrection. Forgiveness after injury follows that paradigm: after damage, re-membering. Not escalation of hatred, but defiance of hatred. And for that matter, Jesus models the liberated life as not exacting every penny of a debt owed either, in such a way that the debtor's life is contorted and pained, but forgiving debt so that everybody has enough—not too little and not too

much. Forgiveness is how everybody lives in God's household.

Let us pray.

Our Father and Mother, help us to make forgiveness the template of our liberation.

Continue forgiving us, so that we are not defined by the worst that we can be; help us to incorporate forgiveness into the way we live so that we embody your way of redemptive re-membering. Amen.