

Sermon – Forgive us our trespasses .. July 12, 2020.

Some years back I was talking about the forgiveness process, talking about it being like balancing the scales. Phil Lebold turned up with a heavy scales, which I have had on the coffee table in my office up until this day, and now in the sanctuary this morning, and they will be travelling on to Australia, where they will sit on a coffee table in the pastor's office at my new church. I find them to be a valuable tool to work with when someone comes in to talk about a heavy loss, a forgiveness issue, a deep hurt. I add weights on to one end, often with some sound. Oh, that feels so heavy. And having talked, in my case listened to the sharing of the hurt, I may begin adding weights to the other side – asking about what may help to balance the scales. I had started on a kind of research project, developing a forgiveness interview, wanting to find out what people have found to be helpful in the balancing of the scales, or at least helping to lift the weight some. I found the term – balancing the scales – in a helpful forgiveness book called – “Forgiving the Unforgivable; overcoming the bitter legacy of intimate wounds.” That sounds heavy. Intimate – from people that we thought we could trust, should have been able to trust, like deep hurts that occur in families. The author – Beverly Flanigan – provides a process of assessing an injury, weighing it up, looking at one's own responsibilities, if there were some; holding the injurer accountable, balancing or loading the scales. It could be that the person has learned a lot about themselves. Some take on advocacy for others who have been hurt in similar ways, and that gives a sense of purpose. The author writes about choosing to forgive and what that might look like, like choosing to expect that no debt will be repaid. It may be that no apology will ever come – and then letting go of that. I like how the author has a chapter about the emergence of a new self. Part of the emerging may be adjusting to a new world view. Like, God doesn't protect people from all hurts. Strength can come out of deep suffering. Part of the new self might be setting stronger boundaries. You know that I am very interested in forgiveness studies. There are so many resources available its hard to keep up with the reading. There are personal and relational health benefits from forgiving. Some forgiveness resources are written more from a psychological point of view and are valuable to Christians and non-Christians alike. And we do have some very unique Christian resources, like the 5th petition of the Lord's Prayer. We mention forgiveness every time we pray the prayer – Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And what does Martin Luther write about this petition? We ask in this prayer that our Heavenly Father would not regard our sins not deny these petitions on their account, for we are worthy of nothing for which we ask, nor have we earned it. Instead we ask that God would give us all things by grace, for we daily sin much and indeed deserve only punishment. So, on the other hand, we, too truly want to forgive heartily and do good gladly to those who sin against us. It's typical Luther, that we are totally unworthy of God's amazing grace – we don't deserve it anyway – we keep sinning daily. But God forgives totally and completely, and with all of this underserved grace, we will truly want to forgive others, to be gracious and merciful to them. One bible reading we could have had today is from Matthew 18 – the parable of the unforgiving servant – the one who owes the king millions and pleads to be forgiven, and the king lets go of this huge debt and forgives him. But this forgiven servant is not able to forgive a much smaller debt that a fellow servant owes him. So the king punishes the unforgiving servant. The fifth petition is a double prayer – for our own forgiveness, and the flowing through of that forgiving to others. Sometimes this double prayer is taught in a conditional way because it can sound quite conditional, that if we don't or cant forgive another person, that God cannot or will not forgive us. Ouch. I know of people where this conditional sense of the Lord's Prayer has helped to motivate them to a forgiveness process, like they had better move on or their own forgiveness might be compromised. I'm uncomfortable with this conditional sense because I think that

realistically we all have some forgiveness issues going on, and yet God's forgiveness continues to flow. Personally I always think it begins with God's forgiveness, and then our own forgiving comes from there. We are covered by Jesus' robe of righteousness in baptism, and we live our lives from there. Luther would say- Live out your baptism daily, repent, pray for forgiveness, pray for greater understanding of where we wrong others, hear that you are forgiven, pray to live into Jesus' new life. Jesus is recorded in John's Gospel as saying as giving eternal life, abundant life in the here and now. I think that forgiveness and forgiving is part of that abundance. Each time we pray the Lord's Prayer, like we will today, we are praying to be a forgiving people, and a forgiving congregation, and a movement of forgiveness worldwide. This is connected in with the other petitions about God's kingdom, doing God's will as it is in heaven. Could we say that in heaven there is perfect forgiveness? All of the old earthly debts are cancelled. So we can do that heavenly work now. When we suffer a deep hurt, we naturally can want to seek revenge. When as a nation we suffered huge losses at 9/11, many went into a revenge mode, like, we must hurt those who hurt us, we must hurt them more. And the 'they' expanded to be all Muslims, or all Arabic people. Yes, we must hold accountable those who perpetrated 9/11, and those who masterminded it, and have boundaries with those continuing to want to do harm. And we can't forgive and forget. But there is also a letting go of revenge which is healthy for the nation, and healthy for individuals, and I think that as Christians we are called to be at the forefront of forgiveness movements. That's getting at healing in deeper and often uncomfortable ways. I am thankful for the lynching museum and memorial in Alabama, and for the work that has gone into recording who was lynched, and where lynchings of African Americans took place, including here in Ohio. Some might say – we should let bygones be bygones, why can't African Americans just get over slavery, and Jim Crow laws, but deeper forgiveness is being hindered if the stories of suffering are hidden, no allowed to be shared. Many people heard this year for the first time of the Tulsa Massacre. How could such a murderous assault on so many not be in history books? I guess it depends on who is telling the history. Though it hurts, encourage individuals, groups of people, to tell their stories, their laments. Don't shut them down. I have done some reading about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Truth was encouraged, greater transparency about assaults carried out by the authorities. And though the perpetrators often got light sentences, the biggest healing came from being able to tell about suffering, for this to be acknowledged and out in the open. That helps to balance the scales. The story of suffering is believed and no longer held in the dark. Today Mary and I are heading downtown for a justice event sponsored by mainly African-American Eastside churches. Today young church members will share some of their own stories of pain and hope. At each of the events we have attended there has been the telling of suffering. I have learned a lot, including learning more about my own biases and prejudgments. Forgiveness movements can really help with eye opening, seeing people very different, people we may be afraid of, as also created by God. I encourage you in your forgiving. It is divine work. It is for your own good, and the good of others. It is often hard, often complex. It is good to have a forgiveness team along with you – like your church. Amen Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who sin against us.