

Sermon on Luke 11:2-4
First UCC Northfield
8.30.20
Lauren Baske Davis

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Luke 11:2-4 Jesus said to them, “When you pray, say:

“Father,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ Forgive us our sins,

for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.

And lead us not into temptation.”

Sermon

Right before Covid-19 was really on our own nation’s radar, I went with a friend to see my favorite musician in concert. Brandi Carlile was playing in Minneapolis! Nowadays, it would be a wild and reckless act, going to a confined venue indoors, with hundreds of other people, breathing the same air.... but then it was just going to a concert. And it was an awesome. Some of you know, because I saw more than a few of you at that concert as well!

Brandi Carlile has been called one of the voices of this generation. She is outspoken on social issues as a gay woman. And when she sings, it is with this whole, raw, soulfulness. She has a way of opening her live audiences to laugh, lament, and be human beings fully alive together.

Brandi Carlile’s most recent album is called “By the Way, I Forgive You.” When interviewed by NPR’s Mary Louise Kelley about the album, Brandi spoke about events that led up to its making, and how it came to be that this album was woven with threads of forgiveness. Brandi recalled her upbringing. She was raised Baptist in a small town in the south, when she was 15, choose a believer’s baptism—the kind of baptism where one *chooses*, often as a teenager or adult—to be baptized by full immersion. She prepared for it with the pastor. She invited all of her family and friends to gather on the special day. She wore her swimming suit to church under her clothing that day. But instead of being baptized, her church pastor showed up and said, “I just can’t do it. I’ve wrestled with this. Knowing you’re gay and you don’t have any plans to change, I just can’t bring myself to baptize you.” Afterwards, she said, her pastor seemed to understand some of the damage he had done. He called and called begging for her forgiveness. Her song, “Harder to Forgive” reflects some of this experience. Because I love you, and if you don’t know Brandi, you should, here’s 30 seconds of the song (play :27-1:10). One of the last lines of the song is “I’m not going to jump towards the light,” at least the light, or “the truth” as her pastor saw it.

When asked specifically about forgiveness, Brandi told the interviewer, “it’s a word that I think is kind of evangelicalized... or glossed over by kind of a ‘hashtag blessed’ way of looking at it. [When actually forgiveness is] a really radical and ugly, difficult process that, you know, great beauty comes from.”

As the album was coming out Brandi even took to social media around the topic of forgiveness, asking people to share stories of people they forgave, or wished they could forgive. “The whole campaign,” Brandi said, “shook me to the core, seeing the things that people are

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forgiving people for....Forgiveness is so radical and so filthy, and it gets made out to be such a casual concept, when really it might be one of the deepest things that we do as humans—to forgive for real deep hurts.” It was in this same time that, Brandi forgave her pastor, publicly, feeling that if she was asking others about forgiveness, she should do it too. “I did it,” she said, “and I felt weird about it, and I still feel weird about it, to be honest with you.”¹

After reading that interview, all I could think was, “well that was candid.” Forgiveness *is* complicated. It *is* messy. Forgiving and asking for forgiveness are maybe some of the hardest things we do, whether they are public, communal acts of forgiveness, or about individual, deep, personal, long-held hurts. They exist in me and in you. There are some of us who are desperate for forgiveness for things we’ve done or not done. Things we may hold in secret or in fear. And there are some of us who are working hard to forgive but just can’t yet. And maybe there are some of us who are *both* desperate for forgiveness *and* are working hard to forgive. Those things can most certainly dwell within a person, at the same time.

Forgiveness can feel like one of the hardest things we practice—asking for it—or doing it. To forgive *or* be forgiven is to name hurt, to name the damage done. To forgive can be to say that the pain that was caused is no longer going to have power over you. To take bolt cutters to the chain binding you to a person. To say, “this isn’t the primary thing that’s connecting us anymore.”² Not to necessarily to cut that person off, but to cut that chain, and say this isn’t the link connecting us anymore. Forgiveness can be a letting go, setting oneself or someone else free. Maybe allowing for new creation to occur in a relationship. Removing shrapnel and gifting health or freedom. And it where there is deep hurt, it is always an intricate and profound process.

I’ve talked a lot about personal forgiveness, but when we pray the Prayer of Jesus, we pray together: Forgive us *our* debts as we forgive *our* debtors. Forgiveness can have a lot to do with individual hurts. But in this time, I’ve been thinking a lot about the things for which we might seek forgiveness. There are many things, but take racism in the context of this new and renewed movement. What do we who are white do regarding the atrocities we have committed? The systems we currently benefit from? Do we ask for forgiveness? From whom would we ask it? In this context, asking to be given forgiveness while still in a position of privilege or power is wrong. Maybe this is why we confess and receive forgiveness from God. Not to be wiped clean and have our consciences eased. But to be set free to engage fully alongside others in the anti-racist work that is being done.

When Pastor Wendy and I plan these sermon series’ we never know what will be happening in the world when we preach them. That’s certainly been true in 2020. And here we are with yet another week. Another police shooting of a community member, Jacob Blake. More protests. More violence. More striving for a better future. Where does forgiveness play into this? As any parent or sibling knows, when one child hits another, and says, “oh, sorry,”

¹ Mary Louise Kelley, Monika Evstatieva, “Brandi Carlile On Practicing Forgiveness, Even When It’s Hard,” interview, National Public Radio, 14 Feb 2018, accessed 28 August, 2020.

<https://www.npr.org/2018/02/14/582454085/brandi-carlile-on-practicing-forgiveness-even-when-its-hard>

² Paraphrase of Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber

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that doesn't work. What does forgiveness have to do with what's happening in our world right now? It's not a quick fix or easy solution. It's ugly, messy, radical. It also has a part to play, because there will be no way forward without it.

As people of faith, forgiveness, love, and the grace of God are at the heart of things for us. Even when our worst selves come forward—and by God, we know they have—God doesn't turn away. It doesn't mean that God's happy about our behavior or endorses it. It doesn't mean God doesn't get angry, or weep. Certainly God weeps with the suffering of the world. But maybe forgiveness means we can name the pain and its roots, admitting and taking responsibility for our own faults, trespasses, debts, sins, times we've missed the mark, ways we've turned from God and each other. Because no one is free until all are free. Maybe forgiveness, in this time, also means we can change. *Our God who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name...Forgive us our sins. So that we may be free to engage in the work that is required in this moment. Which will in some ways involve forgiving and being forgiven. So that there may be justice. So that then, maybe, there may be healing. So that thy kingdom come, thy will be done.* May it be so.

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As you may know, I was on vacation camping in my parents' yard last week. We were just outside of Kenosha, WI in a little township across the border in IL when I heard the news about Jacob Blake, a community member was shot in the back 7 times by officers after stopping to break up a fight he wasn't involved in. Miraculously Jacob survived, but he had damage to vital organs, his spinal cord was injured. He may very well never walk again. And when he woke up in the hospital, he was handcuffed to his hospital bed.

As Ibram X Kendi said, like cancer, we must name racist acts for what they are. If we can't even diagnose a disease, how can we treat it? We who are white, may think of ourselves as people standing in need to forgive. Actually, though, having acted for hundreds of years as oppressors in this nation, we are the ones who need to seek forgiveness. But its trickier than that, because though white folks might be sorry and desperately want to work for change, it's not the time for black indigenous people of color to forgive. White people cannot ask for forgiveness. Not right now. Because to do so would be to ask people who aren't yet experiencing justice to give something power to people who are already in a position of privilege and power. We can't ask for forgiveness in this case. God can forgive.

And perhaps in this time as a , to seek forgiveness is to see that we have the opportunity in every next moment to act in anti-racist ways. The gift of each new moment, and the opportunity to de-center ourselves and our stories, and act as partners co-creating God's kingdom here is the way white people must live into forgiveness. To do the work. Admitting our own faults, trespasses, debts, sins, times we've missed the mark, ways we've turned from God and each other. Because no one is free until all are free. Because we can't have peace without justice first. May it be so. Amen.

Our commitment to forgiveness which is never easy, is born out of God's forgiveness given to us. God's commitment to never fully give up on us. Forgiveness is not to say what happened is okay, its to not give up on the possibility for humans to choose a new way to live, greater fullness of life.

<http://fccalameda.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Prayers-of-the-Cosmos-Booklet.pdf>

Filthy ugly deepest thing we can do. Forgiving or being forgiven

God doesn't give up on us. Scandalous
Process theology of God gives us the next moment and the next after we mess up again.

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Complexity of forgiveness—forgive but not forget. For others it's releasing, setting someone free. Removing shrapnel and gifting freedom.

White people stand in need to forgive when actually need to be forgiven. But in terms of racism, to say we have forgiveness to bestow is to stay in the seat of the oppressor. When actually we are the ones needing to seek forgiveness.

Move from personal, to corporate, from Brandi to Jacob Blake. Honestly, here's the thing. We white people can't ask for forgiveness. Not yet. Because to do so would be to ask people who aren't yet experiencing justice to give something else to people who are the systemic oppressor. And until there's equity and justice, we can't ask for forgiveness. We need to act towards living into the realm of God. It's a power thing. It's complex.