



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“Unclogging the Pipes”

Matthew 6:9-15

Hebrews 12:15

The Lord’s Supper; Deacons Offering

When Sharon and I were in Seminary, the manager and maintenance man of our apartment complexes once grumbled to me how much more he’d been cleaning out the drains in the bathrooms, now that more women were living in those apartments. “Women’s hair,” he said, “sure can clog up those drains.”

I’ve got a downspout from one of the gutters on my house, and it enters a drain pipe at ground level, which is supposed to carry away the rain water. But there are roots from a nearby bush that have grown into that pipe, and the rain can’t get through. I’ve got to find some way to clear that drain, and unclog that pipe, so the water won’t damage my house. From some of these home improvement shows we watch on Saturdays, I know that water at the foundation can cause dry rot, the foundation can fail, and the whole house can get torqued out of shape. I’ve got to unclog that pipe to let the damaging water out.

I remember the first time I tried to unclog a drain. It was like what happened last night to Tom and Barb Dougherty in their rented house. The garbage disposal got stuck with potato peelings. So they got out a big plumber’s plunger, as I hear it, and tried to move the blockage that way. Finally, with one big push, the blockage was cleared. They looked down the sink collar, and to their dismay they saw the garbage disposal had fallen off the drain collar, and the pipes to and from it were in disarray. And their potato peelings and a lot of water were all over the cabinet under the sink. It was a terrible mess. Yep, household living can sure clog up our pipes.

Clogged pipes can be a real problem. Do you remember Walt Disney’s early classic, *Fantasia*, the part with Mickey Mouse as “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice”? The apprentice does all the master’s chores, especially hauling water up into the Sorcerer’s castle. But the Apprentice longs to have the master Sorcerer’s powers. So one night, he steals into the master’s laboratory, opens up his book of spells, and casts spells to make the mop come alive, and carry the heavy water buckets! Success! But soon, the Apprentice spots trouble. The mop seems to be spitting out clones, who also carry their buckets of water and dump them into the holding trough. And more water, and more. Soon the water is overflowing, and the panicking Apprentice is flipping through the spell book for the spell that says, “Stop!” But it’s no good, the water rises and rises, until the master himself is aroused and comes to banish the excess water. Clogged pipes can be a real problem.

When I was in high school, I was in a few plays and musicals. One year, we did *West Side Story*, and a couple of my classmates had the leads. The school auditorium was called “The

Little Theater” for a reason—it was pretty darn small, compared to the student population. So we had to do a larger number of performances of each show, and all were sold out. With a musical, if you were one of the leads and you were not a trained vocalist, it meant you were straining for those high notes, and as the performances wore on, night after night, strange things began to happen to your voice. Toward the end of *West Side Story*, Bill got a cold. He would cough and cough while we were getting makeup, and drink honey and lemon in hot water, to try to soothe his voice for the show. On the last night, he could barely squeak out his songs. His sickness and the stress of his singing clogged up his pipes. I guess you could call him a “pipe-squeak”. . . . Sickness and stress can clog up our pipes.

Our houses have pipes, and our chests have pipes. But our important relationships also have plumbing—did you know that? You bet they do. Naturally enough, dirt accumulates in the drains of all our relationships, and if the drain is not kept clear, it can plug up. And that can be badly damage ourselves with a rawness, like Bill trying to sing that last night, or can badly damage our relationships, and the environment around us—like the Sorcerer’s Apprentice.

I’m sure Jesus was not thinking of “plumbing” while he was teaching from the stories in his Sermon on the Mount, for example, but he shows us how important it is to “unclog the pipes” in our relationships—with God, and with each other. Open your Bibles to Matthew’s gospel, and find chapter 6, about the middle of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. I’m going to start reading at verse 7, and end with verse 15. Some of this will be very familiar—though I am using the Good News Translation in order to keep the familiar from sounding too stale. But some of this may surprise you. Listen with me for God’s surprising Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

Mathew 6: 7-15 (GNT) “When you pray, do not use a lot of meaningless words, as the pagans do, who think that their gods will hear them because their prayers are long. Do not be like them. Your Father already knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven: May your holy name be honoured; may your Kingdom come; may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today the food we need. Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us. Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One.’

“If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done.”

You heard Jesus’ “Lord’s Prayer” in there, didn’t you? You might not have recognized it; most of us learned the version we said together, just now, to close our prayer time. Some churches use the King James Version which says “trespasses”; some churches use the Revised Standard Version, which says “debts”. Most church families teach that prayer to their children when they are very young. After all, Jesus was deliberately making the prayer short, in contrast to the showy pagan prayers, and its shortness makes it easier for children to remember—and adults, too.

Recently, a four-year-old girl was learning to say the Lord's Prayer. She was reciting it all by herself without help from her mother. She said, "...and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from e-mail. Amen.”

A 6-year-old was overheard reciting the Lord's Prayer at a church service: "And forgive us our trash passes as we forgive those who passed trash against us." Kathleen Brandt of Jeffers, Minnesota wrote, "In teaching my boys, ages four and three, the Lord's Prayer, I was startled to hear my oldest boy say "As we forgive those who pass gas against us."

As we say the Lord's Prayer every Sunday, it can become like the color of the walls—taken for granted, not noticed anymore. So that's why I wanted to focus on the Bible context of Jesus teaching this prayer to his disciples, so that we might discover more of what was on Jesus' mind when he gave them this prayer to use.

Before giving his disciples this prayer they could use as an example, Jesus has been teaching them about how to pray, generally. In his time, since everyone prayed out loud, some people had gotten into the habit of prayer exhibitionism. They prayed long, flowery prayers, sometimes moaning or half-singing them, sometimes gesturing elaborately. These people were trying to manipulate their god to act, as if the harder they worked at their prayers, the more their god would likely "get going" to do what they were asking. Other people around them, however, could feel inadequate, as if their prayers were pretty puny. Jesus is saying, these showy prayers are not a model of how we connect with God in prayer. They reveal what the pray-er thinks of his god, and his belief that he has to "work his prayers" to get his god's attention. Our God is not like that, at all. So then Jesus gives an example of the kind of prayer one could pray, based on who God is.

Jesus' prayer is simple; there are only a few petitions in his prayer, and the opening section of praise is brief. In the oldest manuscripts, the familiar words, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen" don't appear, which means that Jesus' original prayer was even shorter. The translators of the Good News Translation chose not to include these extra words; some other translations do include them.

But it's this next part that really shocked me when I read it. I mean, "The Lord's Prayer" is a nice prayer, right? But Jesus continues, and he speaks a warning to his followers—and it's kind of scary. "If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done."

Really? You mean, Jesus, that if we harbor a bitter grudge, that we have the power to stop the forgiveness of Almighty God? "Yep," says Jesus. "That's the way God designed it. Better believe it!"

This is one of those frightening things the Bible tells us. Paul writes in Romans, chapter 1—reinforcing Genesis, chapter 3—that we have the power to turn God down. God lets people go wrong, or to worship lesser things. Here, Jesus tells us we have the power to clog up the pipes that deliver God's forgiveness to us. God gives us up to the consequences of living without him, or to the consequences of unforgiveness. He will let us "sleep in the bed we have made" with evil, or with things that have little worth. It's a scary thought!

When God—here, Jesus—tells us we can clog up the pipes of God's forgiveness, is he being unfair? I mean, I love God. I long for God. Some people, however, drive me nuts. They have disappointed me, or hurt me, or failed my expectations, or violated my trust. Those are the

facts. They said they'd do "A", and instead they did, "B". They were wrong to do that. We can't just let them off the hook, as if their wronging me had no consequences, right, Lord?

Or suppose it's not about me at all. Suppose someone betrayed my best woman friend—cheated on her to go out with another woman. Shouldn't I be outraged? Shouldn't I make him pay? Wouldn't I be disloyal to my friend if I didn't cooperate to set a trap for her "ex", and gossip about him, and shun him in public? What kind of friend would I be?!

And besides, there are times when I LIKE holding a grudge against someone, and not forgiving them. It helps me feel righteous, powerful, fully justified in my anger. It puts the burden on the other person to change, to take initiative to come to me and ask for my forgiveness. And if it doesn't happen, well, too bad for them! Let them suffer!

This is childish thinking—when we were small, we thought we were the center of the universe, and that we caused everything to happen. This notion of the "power" of unforgiveness is a dangerous fantasy we must outgrow. In First Corinthians chapter 13, Paul writes, "When I was a child, I spoke, thought, acted like a child. When I became an adult, I put away childish things." How about you? We must put away childish things.

Have you ever dealt with someone who has let a root of bitterness grow in them? The writer of the book of Hebrews talks about that: "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." (Hebrews 12:15) A friend of mine just this week told me about his uncle. Every time my friend visits, the uncle retells the story of this other guy messing him over. Uncle describes the character of this offender in disparaging terms—he's no good, never was, "ya da, ya da, ya da". This uncle—now an old man—is stuck. He's been frozen in the past by unforgiveness. He's made this part of his very identity—"Oh, yeah—he's the guy who hates whatshisname". And by rehearsing this so often, he's let a root of bitterness—which originally was limited to a particular act, a small part of their long relationship—get bigger, and go deeper, until now it has consumed the whole of that relationship, and left no room for change. When you talk with Uncle, he comes across as bitter—so this root of bitterness affects anyone else whom he tells. The influence of unforgiveness poisons the present, as well.

And the ironic part of this is—it's almost funny, when you look at it from the outside—Uncle's lack of forgiveness may not be hurting his betrayer at all. His betrayer may not even remember his offense, or might have seen the whole thing differently, 'way back then. He's probably gone on with his life, unaware that he's supposed to suffer from the hatred Uncle has for him. The offender "must not have gotten the memo." So who is the unforgiveness really hurting?

And Jesus is telling us this morning that if the root of bitterness that has grown in our relationship with someone, has taken over—"short tempers and long memories", is how the Irish say it—then we have a problem with God, too.

See, Jesus does not "compartmentalize" our lives, like we often do. We will perhaps have a "work compartment" where we act in one way, or a "marriage compartment" where we act another way, and a "sports league compartment" where we act differently, still again. We may even have a "religion compartment" where we put on "our church face", sit with our backs to each other in worship, and go home unchanged. If we have a problem in one area, we try to

keep it separate from the other compartments. For example, if I have a problem at work, I will try not to “bring it home” to mess up my relationship with Sharon.

Jesus is pointing out what many of us have discovered: compartmentalizing our lives doesn't work real well, and takes a lot of energy. And Jesus says, God does not honor our attempts to keep the rest of our lives separated from Him. We have a problem with someone, we also have a problem with God. In half-a-dozen ways in his teachings, Jesus pairs together our relationships with each other, and our relationship with God. What affects one, affects the other. You can't pretend to have a great relationship with God, and at the same time be nursing a grudge against another person or another group. Jesus lifts high the importance of our relationships with each other. If you don't forgive others, God will not forgive you. Scary, isn't it? Who of us doesn't need to be forgiven by God?

So what are we learning from Jesus today? Our relationships with each other are just as important as our relationship with God. Lack of forgiveness damages relationships, and must be overcome.

But there's one more point. Jesus says nothing about the other person coming to ask my forgiveness, does he? Is it really possible for me to forgive another person when they don't agree, or are no longer in the picture? Yes, because forgiveness is a decision. It's a decision to free myself from bitterness, from using energy to hold a grudge.

In a way, forgiveness is selfish. It frees me from the prison of poison a grudge builds up. It frees me to engage—more wisely, perhaps—in new relationships—or a renegotiated, new relationship with the one who offended me. Forgiveness makes life possible. And just as I have the power to hold a grudge, so I have the power to forgive. And as I let it go, a renewed relationship with God is possible, too. “Forgive me my debts, O Lord, **AS** I forgive my debtors.”

Whom do you need to forgive? Do you understand the risk you take with God when you don't forgive another person, or group?

What do you want to do about it?

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on July 8, 2007, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]