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April 10, 2011

Deuteronomy 24:6, 10-18

THE GREATEST PRAYER, PART V: FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS

When I was in the chapel at seminary we were gathered together with many “flavors” of Christianity to worship and when we did the Lord's Prayer as part of the liturgy we usually did it democratically, meaning everyone said it the way they were used to all at the same time. That always led to this wonderful prayer where those of us who said “debts” or “sins” had to then wait for a second so the “trespassers” could catch up with us and we got treated to that great sound of many people saying “trespasses”...all of the “esssesss”...”as we forgive those who trespass against us.” It was just this spot in the prayer, a spot about forgiveness which we will study tonight in the Lenten Book Class, in which those differences combined to make a wonderfully collective sound of diversity.

Yet despite my affection for that kind of diverse reading of the Lord's Prayer, I have to say that I personally cling pretty tightly to the “debts” and “debtors” translation. We have two versions of this prayer in the gospels, Matthew uses the word *opheilemata*, which has economic and loyalty implications. Luke uses *hamartia*, which is actually an archery term for “missing the mark”. That's one of the reasons that some of us say “debts”, a more economic sounding term, and some of us say “trespasses” or even “sins”, which comes from Luke's language.

Even within the Biblical accounts we see this struggle with what Jesus was teaching. Is this an economic instruction - forgive debts - or an ethical instruction - forgive sins? In the book we are studying for Lent, The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer, John Dominic Crossan wrestles with this quandary as well. He delves deep into the Hebrew texts to show us that when the Bible talked about Justice, there was a direct link to debt. When the Bible talks about liberation from slavery, the primary foundation of the covenant between God and Israel, it is talking also about debt. For, as Crossan says, slavery comes from more than just physical oppression, it can also come from economic oppression as a result of interest charged on a loan or what was then called a "pledge". Debt slavery is a very real thing, even today.

One of the best examples I can think of on a grand scale is Haiti. This is a nation that annually competes with Nicaragua for the title of poorest country in the western hemisphere. But how did it get that way? Well a primary reason is that Haiti mortgaged its future to simply break free from French rule. Embargos, poor leadership and a never ending sense of rebellion plunged this country deeper and deeper into debt. But, one might ask, do those facts somehow place this entire country outside of the boundaries of human value? Is it, "Sorry, Haiti, you should have made better decisions?", or an opportunity for those who hold the keys to debt release to practice forgiveness?

Closer to home we now sit with a massive debt crisis here in our country, foreclosures at an all-time high, a powerful and sinister payday loan industry and a relationship to money and exploitation that challenges our faith. Is there any connection between the forgiveness of our "sins" and our forgiveness of debt? How are we created and what does our concept of the source of our creation compel us to do in the world? In other words, if we believe ourselves to be 'created in God's image', then what does that say about us? Shouldn't we be something like God?

I happen to believe that when Matthew has Jesus pray this specific word, "debts", it is not an accident...I don't think that it's just a poetic or structural choice, or his favorite word out of the first century Greek version of a Thesaurus. Matthew selects it specifically and, as Crossan points out in his book, places it in a poetic string -

Give us this day our daily bread AND
Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors AND
Lead us not into temptation.

These things are connected. It's not just about bread or debt or temptation, but all three together in a crescendo. You cannot separate one from the other. Our gratitude for enough reinforces our sense of responsibility to spread "enoughism". 'Forgiving as we are forgiven' places us in awareness of the power of grace and allows us more capacity to serve and be compassionate with others. And that kind of service, that kind of selflessness, leads us away from the temptation of believing that we are the source of creation, that we are "self-made" people, or that we are merely islands occasionally in contact with one another *rather than* a connected community, dependent on one another for virtually everything.

Last Sunday evening we read a very modern version of the Lord's Prayer that used words that I would characterize as that of self-actualization or hyper-spiritualized language. We debated the political nature of the Lord's Prayer versus the psychological nature, with regards to bread and food security. Is this prayer about social justice or our own spiritual development? We had no definitive answer, nor do I think that we should. Here's what I think about this whole dilemma. The prayer is simultaneously about the intrusion of God's Kingdom into our own AND about our own personal development. It is about our own personal forgiveness AND our interaction with one another socially and economically. In what I have called the Jesus Plan, one cannot be distinguished from the other. For if we see ourselves as children of God then we must seek to emulate God, as my children emulate Kathy and I - often to our horror. Likewise if we feel ourselves forgiven, then we spread forgiveness. It is a *quid pro quo* - so sometimes we must work on our sense of feeling forgiven, and sometimes we

must learn to forgive.

That's what the text was about this morning. Built into the very social code of ancient Israel, the torah or the law, was this idea of liberation that was two-fold...actual liberation turns into economic liberation...accepted spiritual liberation becomes concrete physical liberation in the law. In Deuteronomy we get many regulations passed down, some of them appeal even to our modern sensibilities, and some are frankly offensive. But the boundaries placed on economic relationships are worth revisiting...not to just apply them literally to our context, but to look at them for the *spirit* of the law...what is the intention here?

As it is today, loans in the ancient times were made with pledges, or collateral, to secure them. Often people would pledge personal belongings. What the reading from Deuteronomy dictates is that you cannot take a millstone in pledge for that would potentially make the person taking the loan unable to grind wheat into flour for their daily bread. It would be an attack on their basic right to eat. Likewise it places boundaries on when and where you may seek the pledge - you cannot just barge into someone's home. Human dignity must be respected. And thirdly, if you take a person's cloak in pledge, you must return it to them at night. People in those times often slept outside or on their roofs, so a cloak was necessary to keep them warm...again loans and pledges are OK, but not at the expense of human dignity.

When one entered into what was called "debt slavery", meaning that you owed so much that no collateral would suffice and you literally sold yourself or members of your family to satisfy the debt, even then there are boundaries. No more than seven years - the Sabbath timeline - could a person serve as a debt slave. Yes, people who made loans had recourse, but it wasn't unlimited nor could it violate the sanctity of a human being - at least not for long. There is a way, as Crossan notes, to think of our own economic systems that are so debt dependent as creating a whole new type of slavery in which people are often more effectively controlled via excessive debt. The Bible is pretty clear that a fellow Israelite is not to be taken advantage of when in a crisis, but care is to be offered freely.

Crossan believes that this debt talk must be taken literally, not figuratively, (meaning economized not just spiritualized) and that in order for us to be forgiven our debts by God, we must recognize that we owe debts to God. What are those debts? The Bible envisions these debts as stemming from our creation. Created by God, in God's image, we are stewards of all of God's creation. We are, in fact, resident aliens on this great globe that God has created for us and we have an obligation to the very force that resides through all living things. We owe it to God to ensure that there is enough for all of God's creation, we owe it to God to collaborate in establishing God's Kingdom in earth and we owe it to God, as Crossan says, to cease focusing on heaven, especially in order to avoid focusing on earth.

It is that kind of exchange that I think is being played out in this debts-transgressions-sins equation in the Lord's Prayer. The great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once presented us with the idea of "cheap grace", grace that is the result of a quick recitation of magic words instead of the turning of one's heart. This prayer turns us away from "cheap forgiveness". People often struggle with

the idea of forgiveness because they think it means there are no consequences...that forgiveness is a one-way transaction instead of a process of repentance and forgiveness, a relational effort that cannot be done quickly. Forgiveness in the Jesus Plan changes us by *requiring* of us.

Living lives of forgiveness makes us first aware of our own brokenness and then, hopefully, aware that others are broken also, maybe in different ways, but broken just the same. Forgiveness doesn't mean that we allow anyone to be cruel or abusive to us, just as being meek doesn't mean being completely submissive. It means that we are people who operate from the "benefit of the doubt" towards others, not because we are standing against being "me-centered" or because we are embracing being "them-centered" but because we are "God centered" and that is the way that God behaves. It means that we see God first and foremost as a God of liberation who freed us from captivity and that we seek, in turn, to liberate people from their captivity - literal and figurative. The message of Jesus is both self-sacrificial and self-interested all in one, just as forgiveness is both altruistic and self-serving at the same time. When we forgive we do something for someone else, true, but we also free ourselves from the prisons that lingering anger and hard grudges create.

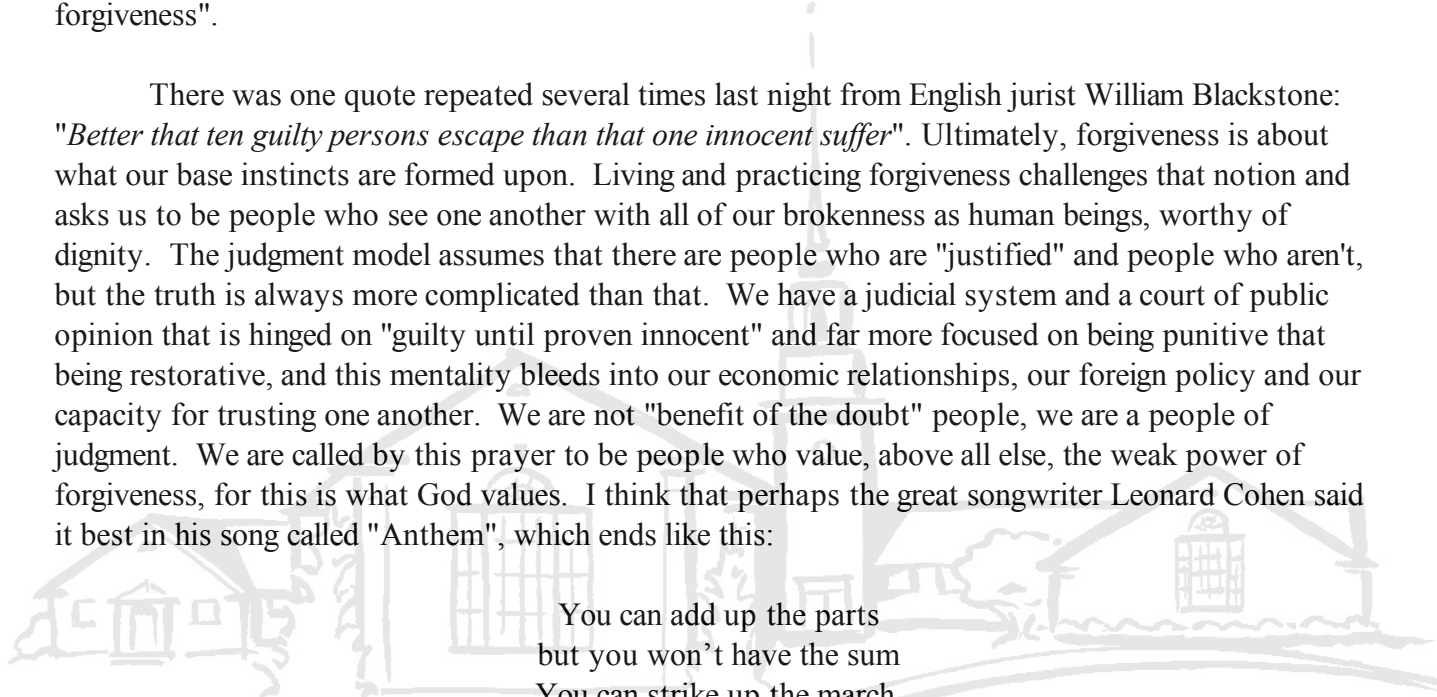
Forgiveness might be the most counter-cultural practice we could engage in, for it resists all of our common sense. Forgiving is seen as weakness but, as Gandhi said, it is actually a characteristic of strength. Still we think that we can only forgive in certain situations, only if it is justified. This is not what Jesus advocates. He advocates forgiveness as a spiritual practice, as a way of connecting with God because this is how God is. The Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw once said, "The secret of forgiving everything is to understand nothing", and that is true. We are taught by Jesus to practice forgiveness, not to understand it. The best spiritual practices are the ones that we simply do, not the ones that we have fully rationalized, even though that runs counter to our dedication to the primacy of rationality.

Forgiveness, whether of debts or sins, is challenging because it defies all of the systems in which we have grown up. It makes justice about something more than just making sure the "bad guys get theirs". Last night, because of the generosity of a church member, Robin, Shawn, Kathy and I went to the "Night for the Innocent" gala at the Skirvin. It was a black-tie affair and we all felt a bit like a fish out of water. The Temptations performed and we listened to some powerful words from people trying to establish an innocence clinic at the OCU School of Law to help track down and release wrongfully convicted persons. We heard many stories about how the judicial system leaves a lot to be desired in acquiring "justice". One of the most compelling speeches was from a relative of a woman who was raped and murdered. She talked about how that family had to go through the horrific crime itself, seeing a man convicted and sent to death row and then the appeals process which exposed the many fallacies of his conviction. They had to watch this man they considered guilty leave the prison and then come to terms with the idea that they may have been wrong. Ultimately, she said, it's not enough just to have someone convicted, you want the right person convicted. The often hard road of forgiveness, I imagine, played a big role in that family's transformation because it finally would not allow them to simply blame someone - anyone. They had to know the whole story...the truth...which will set you free.

This line from the Lord's Prayer does ask us to address our economic and judicial systems, to

ensure that we are being as fair as possible given that we are all broken and partial people trying to govern impartial systems. But it also asks us to look into our hearts, for you cannot separate these activities. To have just systems of governance, we must first re-examine where our hearts lie. Forgiveness is not a sign of weakness, it is the character of God. And, as Crossan reminds us, "of all the things for which we need divine forgiveness, we need it above all else for our lack of human forgiveness".

There was one quote repeated several times last night from English jurist William Blackstone: "*Better that ten guilty persons escape than that one innocent suffer*". Ultimately, forgiveness is about what our base instincts are formed upon. Living and practicing forgiveness challenges that notion and asks us to be people who see one another with all of our brokenness as human beings, worthy of dignity. The judgment model assumes that there are people who are "justified" and people who aren't, but the truth is always more complicated than that. We have a judicial system and a court of public opinion that is hinged on "guilty until proven innocent" and far more focused on being punitive than being restorative, and this mentality bleeds into our economic relationships, our foreign policy and our capacity for trusting one another. We are not "benefit of the doubt" people, we are a people of judgment. We are called by this prayer to be people who value, above all else, the weak power of forgiveness, for this is what God values. I think that perhaps the great songwriter Leonard Cohen said it best in his song called "Anthem", which ends like this:



You can add up the parts
but you won't have the sum
You can strike up the march,
there is no drum.
Every heart
to love will come
but like a refugee.

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*Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.*

AMEN