

Sermon: Debts and Debtors October 15, 2017

The title of this sermon, Debts and Debtors, was determined more by practicality than by theology. I used the words ‘debts’ and ‘debtors’ because I didn’t want Janie to have to spell out ‘trespasses’ and ‘trespassers’ on the sign while potentially standing in a downpour. So, debts and debtors seemed more doable. This title and the title I might have used come from the words of the Lord’s Prayer, as it is sometimes known, or the Our Father, as it is also called. It has been called the most well known Christian prayer in the world. I learned it as a child in All Soul’s Universalist church in Watertown and my mother learned it as a child in the Paterson New Jersey Unitarian church. So even our denomination, at that time on the margins of Christianity, taught this prayer. It was considered ecumenical, the prayer that would be the same across denominations, and was routinely said in any gathering of churches. Which meant, when people got to the line that began ‘forgive us our.....’ there was often a confused murmur while some said debts and some said trespasses. In addition, Catholics stopped at the line ‘and deliver us from evil’ while the Protestants in the group would carry on with ‘for thine is the glory’, etc. Often somewhat loudly. We all prefer our own versions.

Though I learned the debated lines as ‘trespasses’ most Protestants preferred ‘debts’. My husband, raised Catholic, learned ‘trespasses’ and it is also the version used by the Anglican church so I have no idea why I used ‘trespasses’ in a Universalists church or at my Unitarian mother’s knee. I did look up why there are two versions and found this:

These two common variations of the "Lord's Prayer" are from two different English translations of Matthew's version of the prayer (Matt. 6:12).

The "debts" form is from the first English translation of the Bible, by John Wycliffe in 1395...The "trespasses" version is from the 1526 translation by William Tyndale (Tyndale spelling...

In 1549 the first Book of Common Prayer in English used a version of the prayer with "trespasses." This became the "official" version used in the Anglican congregations.

The Wycliffe version had seen modest popular use for about 130 years before Tyndale translated the Bible in the modern language. The Presbyterian and other Reformed churches tended to follow the earlier wording of Wycliffe. When King James IV of Scotland and I of England ordered a new Union translation (published 1611), the King James translators followed Wycliffe's wording of "debts" on that line, though they preferred Tyndale's wording on other lines of the prayer.

So, you choose. Or neither, as the case may be.

There is a lot that has been said and more that could be said about the Lord’s Prayer, including its different versions and its public use, but for today I will spare you that. We’re just going to talk about the line that deals with forgiveness.

Forgiveness comes from a Greek word that means ‘to free or dismiss’. If we add that idea to the words ‘debt’ or ‘trespasses’, it gives us a particular slant on

what we are to do when we forgive or what we choose not to do when we choose not to forgive. Many translations render the word as ‘sin’, as in ‘forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.’ I would imagine that is what most of us have in mind when we get to this line, and what most of us have in mind when we work on forgiving or when we ask for forgiveness.

But here, in the versions of this prayer that most of us know, the language is the language of the marketplace or the realtors, the language of selling and buying, the language of land ownership. Are we more comfortable as economic beings than we are as people in relationships with each other? And was this true from 1395 on? If the language of ‘sin’ has recently been rediscovered to describe how we mistreat each other, we need to understand how that word is used because it has been used as a club more often than it has been used to help us in our understanding of ourselves and others. Sin is best understood as failure to be perfect rather than willful destructive behavior. By those standards, we are, all, sinners. And that realization plays a part in forgiveness. It ceases to be a moralistic term and simply becomes a word that can lead us to compassion and mercy. But it is still a very negative term, carrying with it centuries of abuse, and so to be used very carefully.

When we talk of the situations that lead us to need to ask for forgiveness and that lead us to need forgiveness, they do not usually involve the cold calculations

of trade or property. They seldom involve a sense of ourselves as sinners. They may involve us seeing others as sinners, but that seldom leads to a situation in which reconciliation, the goal of forgiveness, is likely to happen.

Situations involving forgiveness range from the quick 'I'm sorry' in reference to being late, burning the supper, tracking in mud to the situations we usually have in mind when we talk earnestly of the need to forgive and be forgiven. There are remarkable examples of forgiving people, such as concentration camp survivors forgiving the guards who killed their families and meant to kill them or black South Africans forgiving those responsible for apartheid. Then there are more personal examples, the man who forgave his son's murderer and visited him in prison, the Amish families who forgave the man who murdered their daughters and went to help his widow. We hear of these examples with awe and we ask ourselves, could we do the same? What makes some people able to do this and others furious for days over being cut off in traffic? Or finding the energy to carry a grudge against a family member for twenty, thirty, forty years?

Somehow, in forgiveness, the word 'justice' often comes up. And this leads to lots of questions. Is forgiveness of heinous crimes somehow injustice? Is justice only served when mercy is forgotten?

Do people need to be punished before they are forgiven? Should we question forgiveness that is too easily offered? In short, what is the balance between justice and forgiveness?

In people's personal lives, the acts that lead to breaches in relationships sometimes have to do with money; money lent and not paid back; unequal division of possessions; wasteful behavior. But more often problems arise over different issues; betrayal; slights; lack of attention; misunderstandings; withdrawal of support; not being heard; abandonment. These are the everyday feelings that lead people to break relationships. I have mentioned the more serious, the more heinous treatment people have been doing to each other for as long as there have been people, murder, rape, genocide, systematic abuse and oppression. But, for most people, it is the more common ways in which we treat or mistreat each other that hurt us and lead to situations in which forgiveness is needed.

Every religion seems to have some kind of way of dealing with issues of atonement and forgiveness, some kind of discipline, some kind of path toward forgiveness. In Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, which follows the Jewish New Year, is a time of reflection and atonement for one's transgression. These days were recently observed, at the end of September, and the observance of these days gives us some reflections on this process.

In this tradition, injury of another person means that the person who has committed the injury has incurred a debt to the person who has been injured, as well as, for Jews, an injury to God. And so we are back to an explanation of that word ‘debt’ again. If the person who has committed the injury wants forgiveness, they must be willing to undergo the process of atonement and forgiveness because it is a process. The first part of this is that the person who has transgressed, trespassed, sinned against another must come to see that they have done so. The person who has done the injury must be the one who asks for forgiveness, sincerely must repent their causing injury, and must be willing to atone for the injury. Only the offending party can atone for the wrong they have done and the more serious the wrong, the greater the obligation to truly atone, to go through the immensely painful process of self-examination and regret.

On the other side, there is the obligation of the person who has been offended to forgive the person who is asking for forgiveness. Not to forgive someone who has atoned is considered also sinful. This is not an acceptance of the wrong the person has done, not necessarily reconciliation, but an awareness that the person who has offended is also deserving of mercy, since we are all human and liable to error. This mercy is what is expected if the person who has wronged someone is truly

sorry for their deed, truly wants to change their ways, truly has put themselves through the wringer of repentance.

Forgiveness is therefore a two-person process. It is not easy and it is not automatic. It does not involve ‘letting the wrongdoer off the hook’. It does not involve requiring the person who has been wronged to easily forgive with no obligation on the part of the wrongdoer to change. It is not easy for either person involved. The degree of repentance and remorse should be commensurate with the degree of the wrong. Forgiveness does not always mean reconciliation. It certainly does not mean that what the wrongdoer has done will be condoned. Horrible crimes are horrible crimes. They are never to be excused. But this process also acknowledges the humanity of the person who wishes to be forgiven. It also may say that none of us knows what we might have done if we were in their shoes.

In the most personal and private space of our hearts, we all struggle with these forces—what are our own failings, when do we need forgiveness, when is it as necessary for us to give forgiveness as to receive it. These are often individual struggles, sometimes never revealed to another person. But, in Jewish tradition, there was also the institution of a very public sort of forgiveness, one that refers us back to the words debt and debtors. That was the year of Jubilee. In Leviticus, this meant that every 49 years (7 times 7) a Jubilee year would be proclaimed and in

this year prisoners and slaves would be freed and debts would be forgiven. Back to that definition of forgive as 'to free or dismiss'. This forgiveness of debts, which also involved returning land to those who had lost it by forced sale, was because the land and all on it belonged not to each person but to Yahweh and was only held in stewardship, not as a permanent possession. It has also been argued that forgiving debt and freeing prisoners and slaves every 49 years, meant that power could not be increased for a small number of people and therefore tyranny would be prevented. Everyone had to start over again.

It is debatable how many times the Jubilee year actually happened, but Jesus was certainly aware of it. In the New Testament, there are references to both kinds of forgiveness, forgiveness for personal wrongs and forgiveness for those who are in debt. In the Lord's prayer, forgiveness is treated not as a private matter or even as a public policy. It is treated as part of a system, a system which governs our lives. Not only is repentance and atonement needed by the person who seeks forgiveness, not only is forgiveness to be given in the case where that repentance and atonement is sincere, but forgiveness is one side of a coin. The other side is that we must forgive in order to be forgiven. 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.' We will not be forgiven if we do not forgive. We are made conscious of the fact that we are all part of one intricate whole and our actions ripple out from

us, touching everyone. We might be surprised, if we could see this whole system at once, to find who are the debtors and to whom we are in debt. None of us is beyond redemption and all of us have need of it. We are all, in some measure, in debt. Rights and wrongs are not as important as restoring some balance, whether it's the balance of power and wealth or the balance of right relationships.

It has often been said that forgiveness frees the person doing the forgiving as much or more than it frees the person who is forgiven. Living in a state of imbalance is not easy. There are probably few better feelings than when we find a way to reconcile with others, few greater joys than the joys of relationships resolved. No matter how painful atonement and self-examination can be, when the person to be forgiven truly shows remorse and the person forgiving truly wants to do so, then reconciliation lifts the burdens of self-justification, self-righteousness, anger, and sadness from our shoulders. When we dismiss and free, we are, ourselves, freed. And the angels, at the very least the angels of our better natures, sing.

