

Summary:

“As We Forgive,” the fourth in our series on “The Prayer of Jesus,” by Rev. Jay Anderson at Church of the Master United Methodist, Westerville, Ohio. Sunday, September 15, 2019

Detail:

9-15-19 Sermon “As We Forgive”

“The French have only come, “Napoleon Bonaparte told the Egyptians at Alexandria on July 12, 1798, “to rescue the right of the poor from the grasp of the tyrants,” since “all men are equal in the eyes of God.”

That is how John Dominic Crossan begins his chapter, “Forgive Us Our Debts,” in his book on the Lord’s Prayer titled *The Greatest Prayer*. And he invokes this quote from Napoleon about “rescuing the rights of the poor from the grasp of the tyrants” as a precursor to informing us that it was only one year later that one of Bonaparte’s soldiers, digging not far from Alexandria, unearthed a 4x3 foot stone inscribed in classical Greek, in hieroglyphics, and in the popular cursive script of the time that would become known as the Rosetta Stone. After the stone was moved to France and then later to England, the language was translated by a scientist or linguist who knew the classical Greek, which enabled him to then translate the other two ancient languages, revealing untold secrets about ancient Egypt and its culture through its languages.

The inscription on the Rosetta Stone dates to about 196 BCE, or Before the Common Era, during the reign of the boy-king Ptolemy IV Epiphanes, who, like most if not all Egyptian kings, was also considered to be a god, and declared that the king had “remitted some of the revenues and taxes levied in Egypt and has lightened others in

order that the people and all others might be in prosperity during his reign; and has remitted the debts to the crown being many in number which they in Egypt and the rest of the kingdom owed...”

Ptolemy, in Napoleon’s words, had “rescued the rights of the poor from the grasp of the tyrants,” about 1600 years before Napoleon had arrived on the scene. But if we go back another almost 1600 years, and move from Egypt to Babylon - present day Iraq - we find an even larger engraving containing what is known as the Code of Hammurabi. The Code of Hammurabi, named after the ruler of the old Babylonian Empire from 1728-1686 BCE, and uncovered in the 12th century BCE, is the oldest and fullest example of ancient law we have, dating to even before the Law of Moses.

The prologue to the code “asserts that Hammurabi had been divinely appointed ‘to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and evildoers; so that the strong should not harm the weak.’

The epilogue repeats the divine mandate: ‘that the strong might not injure the weak, in order to protect the widows and orphans...in order to declare justice in the land, to settle all disputes, and heal all injuries.’

And found in the code, positioned between the prologue and epilogue, are 282 laws, of which this one is of particular interest for our purposes:

“If any one fails to meet a claim for debt, and sell himself, his wife, his son, and daughter for money or give them away to forced labor; they

shall work for three years in the house of the man who bought them, or the proprietor, and in the fourth year they shall be set free.”

So this law is not just about taxes and debts, as on the Rosetta Stone, but this is about the release from debt slavery itself. No matter the level of debt, the resulting slavery and/or forced labor could only last for three full years.

The legal codes that we find in the Torah - the Law of Moses - contain many aspects of this same tradition. In fact, much of the Law that we find in Exodus and Deuteronomy especially, sounds very much like what is found in the earlier Code of Hammurabi, with some minor differences here and there. They both include the idea of justice descending from heaven to earth, either from a king who is considered to be a god, or from God to a human actor; release from tax and debt, interest and slavery; and special concern for those who are most vulnerable - the poor, oppressed, widows, orphans, and resident aliens.

Crossan's primary focus in this chapter, at least initially, is about the idea of *literal* debt forgiveness, but notes that in the biblical tradition, debt, slavery, and slavery for debt are very closely connected. In ancient Israel, according to the Law of Moses, one could not charge interest or demand a pledge, collateral, of a fellow Israelite to whom you loaned money. Interest or a pledge was fine for loans to foreigners, but not to fellow Israelites or to resident aliens, who were considered neighbors. In fact, the point is made in Leviticus that the land, resources, and money that are the tools of debt service, all belong to God anyway and declares that “I am the Lord your God,

who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God.” (Lev. 25:35-38).

In other words, God freed them from slavery, who did they think they were to permanently re-enslave their fellow Israelites over land and property that ultimately wasn't theirs in the first place?

And the books of the Hebrew Bible, particularly in the Law and the Prophets, repeat the idea of the remission of debts as a requirement of God.

Within the broader idea of keeping Sabbath, was the requirement that all debts were to be forgiven every seventh year, that all land held as collateral was to be returned, that all people who were held in debt-servitude were to be released in the seventh year. This was the ideal situation; this is what the kin-dom of God was supposed to look like.

That is, until it all began to collapse in the 8th century BCE.

After the rule of King Solomon in Israel, the nation divided in two - the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. In 722 BCE the Assyrian Empire conquered and destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. In 586 BCE, the Babylonian Empire conquered first Assyria and all of its holdings, and then the Southern Kingdom of Judah, sending many of its people into exile in Babylon for decades.

In the book of Jeremiah, the prophet shares what Crossan calls a parable of debt release. And he writes, “by *parable* I mean a story that is not given as history, but is asserted as challenge.” The bigger issue, he suggests, is not that this happened in just this way - the actual history is given to us in the book of 2 Kings - so much as what it suggests for us in our relationship with God. And the parable tells the

story of Zedekiah, the last king of the southern kingdom of Judah, who rebelled against the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE. Nebuchadnezzar “slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, then put out the eyes of Zedekiah; they bound him in fetters and took him to Babylon along with all of Judah’s aristocratic leadership. And Crossan suggests we might think of this story as a one-act play told in three scenes.

In scene one, as described in the book of Jeremiah:

King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to make a proclamation of liberty to them— 9 that all should set free their Hebrew slaves, male and female, so that no one should hold another Judean in slavery.

10 And they obeyed, all the officials and all the people who had entered into the covenant that all would set free their slaves, male or female, so that they would not be enslaved again; they obeyed and set them free.

11 But afterward they turned around and took back the male and female slaves they had set free, and brought them again into subjection as slaves. (Jer. 34:8-11, NRSV)

King Zedekiah was not an honest dealer.

In scene 2, God, as expected, emphasizes that the divine model for this covenant of release from debt slavery is the release from Egyptian bondage:

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I myself made a covenant with your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, saying,

14 “Every seventh year each of you must set free any Hebrews who have been sold to you and have served you six years; you must set them free from your service.”

But your ancestors did not listen to me or incline their ears to me. (Jer. 34:13-14, NRSV)

So the people, led by their king, acknowledged what they were supposed to do, accepted it, and then turned around and defaulted on it in what Crossan describes as a “heavy-handed way.” After that, God warns that their actions in taking back the slaves has “profaned” God’s name - that is, God’s character, God’s nature.

And then comes scene 3:

Therefore, thus says the Lord: You have not obeyed me by granting a release to your neighbors and friends; I am going to grant a release to you, says the Lord—a release to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine.

I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. ...[Your] corpses shall become food for the birds of the air and the wild animals of the earth.

21 And as for King Zedekiah of Judah and his officials, I will hand them over to their enemies and to those who seek their lives, to the army of the king of Babylon, which has withdrawn from you. 22 I am going to command, says the Lord, and will bring them back to this city; and they will fight against it, and take it, and burn it with fire. The towns of Judah I will make a desolation without inhabitant. (Jer. 34:17-22, NRSV)

In that parable the very reason for the Babylonian exile, according to Jeremiah, was an alleged acceptance and then rejection of the Sabbath year “release” from debt and debt slavery. “In that parable,” Crossan offers, “the Sabbath year’s release from debt slavery is judged so important that defaulting on it is the specific reason for Babylon’s imperial devastation of Israel.”

After about 30-40 years, however, the Persian empire under Cyrus the Great defeated Babylon and assumed control of its empire. And rather than just loot all of its holdings, as Babylon had done before, it allowed the people of Israel to return to their land to rebuild, and then forced them to pay taxes and interest to Persia as they redeveloped their devastated homeland.

After Rome conquered Israel and much of the middle east in the 2nd Century BCE, the imposition of imperial taxation and interest payments continued, even as this went against the law of Israel.

So, the *literal* understanding of debt as what one owes to God or neighbor seems immediately obvious as Israel's biblical tradition flows into and through the *Abba* prayer of Jesus. It also represents that *literal* hope for enough bread for today and no debt tomorrow that has been the ancient dream of earth's "have-nots." This is the context into which Jesus and his ministry come to the forefront. And it was the forgiveness of *literal* debt that Jesus has in mind, at least in part, when he gives this prayer to his disciples.

We can be certain of this, in part, because of the way Jesus talks about debt forgiveness, and the role of taxes in other places in the gospels. One of the "fishy" stories that I alluded to in last week's message goes like this:

Jesus instructs Peter to go to the lake, cast a line into the water, bring in the first fish that bites, and upon landing the fish, open its mouth to reveal a gold coin with which to pay the Roman tax. In another place, when asked whether it was lawful to pay the Roman tax, Jesus takes a Roman coin, asks the crowd whose image was on the coin - to which they replied that it was Caesar's image - and then proceeds to tell them that they were to give to Caesar what was Caesar's and to give to God what was God's.

Perhaps his most well-known story about debt, however, comes from Matthew 18, in what is called the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant:

Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?”

22 Jesus said, “Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times.

Other translations say “seventy times seven.”

The meaning here is not a specific number, the meaning is to forgive without limitation. The passage continues:

23 Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

24 When he began to settle accounts, they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold. 25 Because the servant didn't have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold, along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment.

26 But the servant fell down, kneeled before him, and said, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.’ 27 The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan.

28 “When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins.

He grabbed him around the throat and said, ‘Pay me back what you owe me.’

29 “Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.’

30 But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt.

31 “When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended. They came and told their master all that happened. 32 His master called the first servant and said, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me.

33 Shouldn't you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ 34 His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt.

35 “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don't forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

And it is here in Matthew that we begin to see the transition in understanding of “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” from

a forgiveness of literal debt to a broader meaning of first trespasses, and then of sin. And we see that migration in Mark and Luke as well. Writing somewhere between 30-50 years after the time of Jesus, the communities that produced the Gospel accounts began to more broadly understand Jesus' words in the prayer within the larger context of debt slavery, but also slavery to sin. The actual authors of the Gospels move us beyond a literal reading of Jesus' words to include a larger metaphorical interpretation as well.

And it is fair to say that most Christians saying the Lord's prayer today understand or interpret those "debts," or "trespasses," as meaning "sins" rather than something that is owed to God or someone else.

And as I said above, we see that migration beginning to happen in the Gospel accounts as the writers, in the decades after Jesus' earthly ministry, begin to interpret Jesus' words and teachings to new communities, within the larger oppressive Roman empire of which Israel is now a part.

So, as we read this prayer, as we read the other stories, "it seems advisable to read Matthew's text as including *both* debt *and* sin - not debts alone, not sin alone, and certainly not sin instead of debt, but both together. Indeed, the ultimate challenge may be to ponder their interaction. And, at least for the biblical tradition, when debt creates too much inequality, it has become sinful." (Crossan, 160)

And lastly, let's consider the line, "And forgive us our debts/sins, as we also *have* forgiven our debtors/sinners" in Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer. The word "as" there can be interpreted in two ways, one as a *comparison* - forgive us in the same way, to the same degree, as we have forgiven others, or the idea that we forgive because God

forgives us, or it can be interpreted as a *condition* - forgive us only if we have forgiven others. Because of the additional verses added at the end of the prayer in Matthew's Gospel, in verses 14-15, Matthew seems to be suggesting that forgiveness is conditional; we will not be forgiven if we do not forgive others. However, Matthew is the only one who takes this position, and his use of that previous story of the unforgiving servant is, in part, intended to make that point.

But, as Crossan points out, "In the Lord's Prayer, the sequence is divine forgiveness, *then* human forgiven, as a simple comparison. But in the [additional verses] the sequence is reversed and made into an emphatic condition. If we do not forgive others, neither will God forgive us." And he asks the question, "Is it true that God will forgive us everything *except* our own unforgiveness? ...of all the things for which we need forgiveness, we need it *above all else* for our lack of human forgiveness."

Crossan concludes, and I would concur with his conclusion, that "whether we read Matthew 6:12 in the Lord's Prayer as about debts or sins, divine forgiveness is never, never conditional and should not be interpreted that way. The question is not whether God will forgive this or that sin" - multiple other places in scripture tell us that that is NOT the case - "but whether there is anything that God will not forgive, even - or especially - our lack of human forgiveness."

This is a challenging week in which to speak about forgiveness, as we remember the 18th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on our nation. In fact, forgiveness is rarely an easy subject to tackle, both inside and outside the church when we think about it through the lens of tragedy, cruelty, hatred, and violence. But, as hard as it is, we must talk about it. And as hard as it is, we must forgive. We never forget - "forgive and forget" is nowhere to be found in Scripture - but as followers of

Jesus Christ we must come to a place of forgiveness. And it's not because the God whose nature, whose character, as revealed to us in Jesus the Christ as love, will withhold forgiveness because, in our humanity, we struggle or fail to forgive. No, it's because our failure to forgive hurts nobody but ourselves. Nobody. Failing to forgive another has been equated to our drinking poison and hoping that someone else will die. My failing to forgive another does nothing to that other person, but causes untold devastation to my own soul. We are called to forgive because God forgives, and we are made in the image of God.

We are called to forgive others their debts, their trespasses, their sins - against us or against humanity - because God in God's mercy, has forgiven ours.

Scripture tells to forgive unconditionally - ourselves and others. God wants to save us...from ourselves.

The word *salvation* comes from the same root word, *sozo*, as does forgiveness, healing, wholeness, health, cleansing... God wants wholeness and health for us - but failure or refusal to forgive actually harms our health, both our spiritual and our physical health.

Forgiveness is a celebration of the overflowing, unmerited love of God. It's a love we need every day of our lives, like the physical, spiritual and global bread we talked about last week. We are as dependent on the one as we are on the other. In fact, we could pray "Give us this day our daily love, as we give love to others."

What is this love of God? It is a love that never counts or keeps track. It's an extravagant love that forgives to infinity and beyond, a

love that makes no sense and that leaves no room for anger, grudges, or revenge.

It's a love that cancels all debts, trespasses and sins.

It's a love that, when we accept it, allows us, empowers us, compels us to forgive those who have harmed us, even in the deepest and most personal of ways, so that we might experience the fullness of forgiveness, so that God can save us from our worst enemy...ourselves.

Who are the people from whom you have withheld forgiveness? Do you see that your failure to forgive them is not harming them at all, but is a cancer eating away at *your* own soul? Christ *implores* you to resolve now to let those old vengeance and angers slip away, so that, with God's help, you can move on in your life and embrace the grace that God has for you.

That is the Gospel - THAT, is the good news. Amen.