

Living by debts?

Lamentations 1.1-6; Ps 137; 2 Timothy 1.1-14; Luke 17.5-10

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How many of you have any debts? What do you owe? Bank, Visa, Master Card...? Have you borrowed something and know that you need to return it? Other things? Perhaps you feel "indebted" to someone you hurt once and you've never settled with them? Perhaps you feel indebted to God for some gift that God has given you: a miracle in your life, a job, a child.

Now it's one thing to have debts; it's another to let them consume you. I don't mean people who work for Visa or American Express or one of the banks or even Revenue Canada: they probably don't think too much about the debts that people owe their institutions when they go home at night. But, what about the debtors: Do you ever feel as if those you have debts to control your life? Marionette?

Or, how many of you have people who are indebted in some way to you? Perhaps it's a loan that you gave someone and they still haven't paid it back. Perhaps it's that lawnmower that your neighbour or your daughter borrowed last month. Perhaps you've been hurt by someone and you are just waiting for the opportunity to get back at them. They might even know that and you are glad that they do. Perhaps you've been cheated on and you're just waiting to cheat on the person who cheated on you. Perhaps you feel that God's indebted to you because you've served him faithfully all these years and, well, you've never been given anything really special.

Again, it's another thing to be owed something, and something else entirely again to live your life focused on the debt that you are owed.

As we know, in the case of debts, it's not unusual to have debts. In fact, it's quite common. But, this morning, I want to think with you for a few moments about people who make central to their lives questions of who owes me what and what do I owe them. You may know someone like that. There may be someone like that here today.

The world of Jesus day was a world that was completely focused on debt. In fact, every aspect of life smelled of debt. Most of those who worked the land didn't own the land; they were indebted to large landowners who did. Women were indebted to men, either their fathers who owned them through childhood or their husbands who were given the dowry on marriage. Friends were indebted to other friends and obligated to offer whatever was needed to their friends when guests came to visit or when tragedy hit a family.

And everyone felt indebted to God, because after all God had brought the Jews into the land, had brought them out of not one exile but two, that of Egypt and that of Babylon -- which is the context for the reading from Lamentations. And God had cared and fed for them all the way along. They owed God everything. They could never repay it.

Now, in the days of Jesus there was a group of religious men who accepted this. In fact, they taught it sacrificially, often with the result that they were martyred. They began to live out their lives in complete, devoted service to God. They are a group of men very much like the teachers in the Muslim madrassahs around the world today. They believed very strongly in God; they knew that their whole lives need to reflect their obedience to God, and they wanted others to obey God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength. So, they spend their days working, and their nights teaching the Law to the people. They were, for the most part, good people.

In Jesus' day they were called the Pharisees.

But, do you know what happens to religious people who believe that they are true servants of God, following God's commands every step of the way? They begin to see God as being indebted to them. They begin to believe in their heart of hearts what most of us begin to believe after we've given everything to help someone: those whom we help owe us something. Even if it's just a word of thanks, they still owe us something for what we've done, even if they didn't ask us to do it.

By Jesus' day, the Pharisees had begun in their heart of hearts to say to themselves: "I am giving everything to God. Hey, God owes me big time." Unchecked or unheeded that feeling can fester. "Hey, God, look at all I've done for you! You owe me, big time!!!"

What Jesus found among the Pharisees, then, was a group of highly motivated, theologically astute, people who were giving themselves to the great task of telling other people what they should be doing to follow the Law and they now felt that God was indebted to them for what they were doing. Why, they even knew God's name, and how to talk to God by name, and you know what that does: it gives you power over God so that you can call on him when you need to.

But Jesus challenges the Pharisees in today's Gospel by reminding them: "Wait a minute: you're just servants of God, right? You don't really think that you can control God do you? After all, what kind of God would that be? That kind of God is the god of the magician, the genie in the bottle, who when you say his name or rub his lamp, will come to serve you. Is that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a God who calls what is not into existence? a God who calls a nation into being? Didn't you start off thinking that it is you that are indebted to God, that you are the slaves and you deserve no thanks for the service that you have performed, and not the other way around?"

Well, as often happened in Jesus' controversies with the Pharisees, they must have been completely perplexed. They probably hung their heads and said: yes, he's so right.

And that is exactly how this message is often preached, especially on this Gospel. And thus, that is often the end of the story, right?

In fact, at this point, Christian preachers of Jesus' words often then conclude: ... and if it was true that the Israel of Jesus' day was indebted to God, how much truer is it of us who are indebted to God through the sacrifice of Jesus? Do we not owe him everything? Are we not simply unworthy slaves who do what we are told, because we owe him everything?

But...

This is not the end of the story. If it were, it would be the wrong ending! Because NEITHER position of debt is consistent with Jesus' message throughout the rest of the Gospel. Jesus certainly did not come to affirm that God could be controlled by those who served him faithfully, like a genie, but neither did Jesus come simply to affirm what any good Jew already knew, that the debt with God was so great that no one could ever pay it,

Jesus came to change the situation of debt entirely. Jesus came not just to correct the Pharisees nor to reinforce the old time religion of debt but to forgive the debt. And note: he came not just to proclaim the debt forgiven but to do what was necessary to forgive it.

And so, in this story in the Gospel, as in all the others that you have been hearing since last Spring in all of the readings from Luke, Jesus turns to his own disciples, drawn not from among those who want to control God but from among those who can't even control their own lives -- and to any Pharisees who don't want to walk away with their heads hanging down -- , and he shows them all a better way.

As opposed to a way of thinking of and dealing with God that involves either being in debt to God or God being in debt to us, Jesus teaches that God has already given everything to the world and that, yes, He could require of us that we now serve him as slaves, but He doesn't!

Instead He frees us from slavery, not just to him, but to anyone or anything. He makes us His children, free from the slavery in the world and even free from the slavery to death.

He doesn't force us to serve Him. Why? Because, as Jesus makes Him known, He is our Father. As Father He says to us: you are my sons, and my sons do not serve me as slaves; they grow up to inherit the kingdom. As a human father doesn't expect his children to give back, with interest, all that has been given to the son while growing up -- the food, the shelter, the allowance, the protection -- as if it were debt, so I do not require back anything that has been given to you. You are free. Free.

We are free to use all that the Father has given us.

There are still today two ways to live our lives before God and the world around us:

We can go through life focused on debt. We can go through life asking: what do I owe or what am I owed? what do I owe the bank, my employer, my co-workers, my family, my God? or what do people around me owe me, what does my wife owe me, what do my kids owe me, what does life owe me, what does God owe me?

Or, we can go through life as free men and women, sons of God, heirs of the kingdom, knowing that the only debt that really matters is the one that has already been paid off by Jesus, on the cross, and which no longer exists. With that debt paid, no one can make you a slave any longer. Be it in the American South of the early 1800s, or in Darfur today, or in Ottawa tomorrow.

And if they try to tell you that you still owe a debt, if they try to tell you: "you? you were born a woman, you can't do that work", or "you can't do that kind of work, because you were born black", or if they tell you that you are who you are simply because of whatever you were born as, remember this: God has forgiven whatever debt you or your ancestors owed. You have been freed by God! Now, go forth in the power of the Spirit!

That is the faith that Paul was entrusted with and which he writes of to Timothy. That is the faith that moves trees and moves mountains. The faith of a slave? the faith that looks to God with the fear of a debtor? or the faith of someone who feels as if he or she has God in his pocket and is able to make God do whatever he wants? is a faith that maybe can do magic tricks but it cannot change the landscape of the world. The faith that can do that is only found among those who trust in a Father like our Father, the Lord of the Universe, who gives even before we ask and who gives abundantly from the divine abundance. The fear of debt will ultimately lead those who live by it either to crumble under it or to rebel against the creditors.

So, this morning, the real question is not is there any hope for debt relief; that has already come. The real question here is: will you accept the freedom? Or, having become used to living with debt, will you continue to live your lives focused on debt?

When you leave this place this morning, look around at the people out there. You will be able to tell right away the difference between these two types of people, the debtors and the freed.

You will be able to tell the difference between those who live lives focused on debt and those who live lives of freedom. You will see the one in the drawn and haggard look of those who are burdened with debts they feel they owe or you will see the self-assured smugness of the religious ideologue who has God in his pocket. But, you will see them clutching, Scrooge-like, at the little that they have, even to their lives until the last moment.

But, in those who live lives that reflect the freedom that God has given us all by paying off the debt we all owed, you will see a joy-filled face, the face of one who once was lost and who now is found. You will see one who is generous, not only with his substance, but also with his life, because he knows that his huge debt was forgiven. You will see one who now lives not out of debt but out of gratitude and generosity, one who sings with all her heart "O praise ye the Lord".