

“Forgive Us Our Debts”  
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Sept. 18, 2022 – Proper 20C

As most of us know, loan forgiveness has been in the news recently, with President Biden’s latest initiative to ease the burden of student debt in our country. And you may also know his actions have met with very different responses in the Christian community.

Some folks cite Psalm 37 – “the wicked borrow, and do not pay back” – to claim that student loan forgiveness promotes immoral behavior and so is unjust. Others in the Christian community point to Deuteronomy, which tells people to forgive all debts every 7 years. And to Leviticus, which calls for a grand jubilee of forgiveness every 50 years, when even land lost to debt over generations is returned to its former owners.

Today we heard the prophet Amos rail against those who practice religion even though their true interest is in taking advantage of people in the marketplace. In Luke we heard Jesus tell a parable about a manager, who among other shady dealings, forgives debts not his to forgive.

This man is sometimes called the Unjust or Dishonest Steward. Or he’s called the Shrewd Manager, or even the Prodigal Steward, depending on how the story’s interpreted. We’re generally not very aware this parable is paired with – and meant to be read with – the story of the Prodigal Son, since we hear that other story during Lent. These two parables directly follow and expand on the pair we read last week – of the prodigal shepherd and the prodigal woman.

In both the prodigal son and steward stories, a man squanders property that rightfully belongs to his superior. These guys squander not only the wealth they’ve gotten access to, but also their livelihoods, and their honor. The language in both parables implies they squandered even their substance – their very being. Both are, or are about to be, uprooted, homeless, and worried about survival.

In their desperation they both seek wisdom from the same unreliable source – themselves. And each comes up with a plan for how to get back into the good graces – and income stream – of the ones who hold the purse strings. It sounds like the prodigal son really does have an awakening leading to some degree of repentance. It’s a little less clear with the steward.

Some scholars say the steward likely restored some good will to his employer by reducing people’s debts, so that his actions were beneficial to others even if entirely self-interested. Be that as it may, the owner found his deeds shrewd -- which might be better translated as “prudent” or even “wise” -- and commendable. We don’t know if the boss kept his manager on or they just parted on better terms. But clearly some good will was rebuilt there, too. So, what’s the point?!

These intertwining parables all point to the coming realm of God. Really, the shepherd who goes after the one lost sheep can be seen in the same light as the steward, in that he also risks his master's property. And the woman who finds her coin and the father who finds his lost son throw lavish parties, showing they, too, can be reckless with their wealth. And these are all clearly good guys and gals in the stories. So again, what's the point?

The point is entering into the upside down and inside out economy of God. This world's broken economy is all about accumulating wealth. In fact, a U.S. for-profit corporation is more or less required to maximize profits over all other values. Even though there's plenty of material wealth in this world, when people hoard it, others will not be able to get what they need to thrive. Or sometimes even to survive.

We now live in a country where the wealthiest people – the top 10% -- control more than 75% of the wealth and the bottom 50% own only about 1%. There's been a huge shrinking of the middle class in recent years and even more intractable poverty for the poor. On top of that, our nation controls a quarter of the world's wealth even though we have less than 5% of its population. Not a pretty picture. And not God's economy!

God's economy of course includes material wealth, but it doesn't elevate it to the greatest value. The greatest value in God's economy is Love, a spiritual value that requires giving of oneself, and one's wealth, for the well-being of others. In God's economy, material wealth is a means to a spiritual end rather an end in itself.

In our economy economic transactions like buying, selling, lending, and investing are key. And they're designed to benefit the "haves" rather than the "have nots." In God's economy the well-being of the entire community is paramount. And giving and forgiving, as part of a gifting and merciful economy, is central.

Have you ever noticed the doublet about material giving and forgiving in the Lord's prayer? "Give us today our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." That's not quite how we say it on Sunday mornings. But it's one continuous sentence, two connected ideas, in both Matthew's and Luke's gospels. Luke changes the second part to forgiving our sins as we forgive those indebted to us. But there's still a material dimension to the forgiveness language. And in both Gospels, forgiveness is definitely the flip side of taking only what we need.

Some commentators suggest that the church almost entirely spiritualized the forgiveness of debts after it gave up its original life-style of sharing wealth communally. I don't know how true that is. But the Bible overall, and Jesus, definitely lift up economic sin as a paramount impediment to loving and serving God. Quite simply, "You cannot serve God and wealth."

That's not at all ambiguous, which for most of us Americans should be at least a little troubling, since we live under an economic system that prizes the accumulation of wealth to the extreme.

You only need to have a net worth of about \$100,000 to be in the richest 10% in the world, even though that's very moderate wealth by U.S. standards.

Regarding our first world excessive love of money, here's Pope Francis speaking pretty bluntly:

Money sickens our minds, poisons our thoughts, even poisons our faith . . . . We can never serve God and money at the same time. It is not possible: either one or the other. This is not Communism. It is the true Gospel! They are the Lord's words." He goes on to quote the Church Fathers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century calling money "the dung of the devil."

In case you were wondering!

Here, I want to note that there are people working to significantly change the capitalist system. One such pioneer is Bangladeshi banker and economist Muhammad Yunus. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in microfinance, that helps the very poor obtain credit, and in social enterprise, that uses business principles and practices to help solve social problems.

A major social enterprise in the U.S that's close to my heart is Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, the largest gang rehab and prison reentry program in the world. Homeboy runs about a dozen businesses of various kinds to provide job training and employment for Homeboy members. And those businesses earn millions of dollars to support the many other transformative programs Homeboy offers. They call their model Economic Equality Capitalism, and it's spearheaded by Thomas Vozzo, a former Fortune 200 executive.

Another innovator is Yvon Chouinard, the founder and CEO of the sporting goods company Patagonia. He recently put 98% of the shares of his company into a non-profit whose earnings will go toward restoring and protecting the natural world. The 2% of shares he kept are now in a Trust dedicated to that same work, though this maneuver lets him maintain control of the company and avoid taxes. Maybe not entirely altruistic, but definitely beneficial to our planet and so to all of us.

How we deal with money is clearly something Jesus calls us to pay close attention to. But, as always, God is very willing, even eager, to meet us exactly where we are. Whether it's the prodigal son returning home with his tail between his legs, the older brother paralyzed by resentment, or the shrewd manager trying to gain people's favor, God cares much more about the consequences of our actions than about the purity of our motives.

Actually wading into the unending stream of divine grace – of giving and forgiving – is paramount for God. God values our Love above all else. And Love is as Love does. The irony, of course, is that this is absolutely in our self-interest, as well as in the interest of others. It's a "both / and." The way to God and back home to our true selves is through our giving and forgiving relationships with other people.

In the Lord's prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" is not an "if/then" proposition. It's not that God will only forgive our debts if we forgive our debtors. It's that we need to actually forgive to fully immerse ourselves in the healing waters of forgiveness. God's grace and mercy are always offered, but we have to say "yes" to fully avail ourselves of it. And our "yes" is much more authentic in our actions than in just our words.

We live in a liminal time – this last 2000 years since Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The fullness of God's reign is surely at hand – at least in evolutionary time – but it still only peeks through in bits and pieces. As part of our human evolution, God implores us to risk everything and dive into the flow of grace whenever we glimpse an opportunity. If we seek healing and wholeness, which is holiness, we need to enter into the flow of forgiveness and grace both in prayer and in how we live our lives.

Today we heard Paul remind Timothy that people in high positions need prayer as much as the poor and vulnerable if we want to live peaceable lives in godliness and dignity. When Paul says God desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth, he's including even those of us at the top of the food chain.

So when we pray for world leaders, I hope we include economic leaders as well. And when we pray for the lifting up of the poor, that we pray just as hard for the transformation of the rich, which includes most of us middle class Americans.

These parables are an invitation to self-knowledge. Do I genuinely seek God's transformation in prayer and action or am I just going through the motions? Is my prayer more wishful thinking than it is a lived surrender to God's liberating grace? Are my ways in the world more likely to help level the playing field or to help me accumulate more than my share?

In light of today's readings, it's pretty telling our American money says "In God We Trust" on it. It's up to us whether we take that as a call to ongoing conversion of life or as an invitation to idolatry.

Amen.