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“Daily Bread and Debts...or is it Trespasses and Sins?...or...?”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, July 18, 2021

Leviticus 25:8-12

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

Isaiah 25:6, 9

*On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.
It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the LORD for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.*

Matthew 6:11-12

*Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

Today we conclude a brief, three-part sermon series focusing on some of the aspects of the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's Prayer could be a year's worth of sermons, certainly a summer's worth of sermons. But there were just a few pieces that I wanted us to focus on this month. And so, we end that look today.

When trying to understand and make present-day sense of this prayer, the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus gives to his disciples of all ages, telling us to pray this way, it is impossible for us to recall the economic realities faced by Jesus and most of his first disciples. Jesus himself was a poor day laborer from a tiny village on the geographic and economic margins of Israelite society. Like his father before him, the carpentry work Jesus did each day hopefully provided enough money to feed his family, his mother, and his siblings for that day. And if everyone in the family scrimped and saved and lived very frugally throughout the week, the wages of six days might just stretch to provide food on the seventh day, the Sabbath day, when not working in gratitude to God meant no income.

Jesus' first disciples were women and men from similar economic circumstances, and those to whom Jesus initially preached were from the same circle. Every day, day after day, they labored for the day's food and nothing more. Nearly everyone that

Jesus interacted with, spoke to, cared for, healed, journeyed with-- nearly everyone existed on a razor's edge where illness or injury meant starvation or possibly death. In the face of this bleak economic reality that Jesus-- it is in the face of this bleak economic reality that Jesus teaches his disciples that they should pray for daily bread. Though a better translation of the Aramaic in which Jesus spoke-- better translation goes something like this. Give us tomorrow's bread today. Give us tomorrow's bread today. Asking God for tomorrow's bread is tied to the earlier line in the prayer. Your kingdom come on Earth, God, so that earth becomes just like heaven. That's my paraphrase, but hopefully, you can figure out which line that is. The prophets of Israel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, and others, these prophets understood the heavenly kingdom as the place of God's abundance, the place where endless water flowed, the place where a brimming banquet table was always accessible to everyone, like a cruise ship banquet table, only better. The place where God's mercy was meant for all, the place where love was the only currency. Our brief Isaiah lesson describes the feast that tomorrow's bread for today looks like. Standing in the line of these great prophets of Israel, Jesus taught all who followed Him and all who listened to Him to pray for God's heavenly abundance so that they no longer had to be economic hostages to the day at hand. Give us tomorrow's bread today, He teaches His disciples. Now coming from the economic abundance that we come from, I think it's hard for us to grasp the radical nature of Jesus teaching disciples to seek tomorrow's bread today. He is inviting disciples to have audacious hope in the face of hopeless present-day circumstances. He is inviting disciples to trust God's economic resources more than the human economics in which they live. And it is this invitation for disciples to have ultimate trust in God's economics that leads to the next lines in the prayer about forgiveness of debts and debtors. The Aramaic word translated as debts is one of those words which has multiple English translations. And so it can sometimes be confusing as you move from Aramaic to Greek to English.

Debts and sins and trespasses are each an acceptable English translation of the Aramaic original. So when we pray these different words in our different traditions, nobody's really wrong. Everybody's right at some level. But given the economic context of Jesus' focus in teaching on prayer, the word debts, I believe, best conveys the consequences of human brokenness. When the action of one human being harms another human, or when the collective actions of a group of people harm an individual or another group of people, such brokenness has real costs. Physical and economic and spiritual costs that function as an accumulated debt. The one or ones exhibiting the brokenness damage their relationships with each other and with God at a cost to themselves. And when one or ones are on the receiving end of brokenness, the brokenness, whether they're an individual or an entire group, when they're on the receiving end of brokenness from others, they experience loss that often has economic consequences. New Testament scholar, Amy Jo Levine, says that sin in Jesus' day was imagined as a debt, as if everyone has a heavenly bank account, and when one sins, the account becomes drained a bit more and more and more until it is empty. Forgiveness restores the balance. Forgiveness fills the account between humans and God, as well as among members of the community between each other.

Now, the primary theological foundation that lies behind Jesus' focus on debts is described for us in our Leviticus lesson, which George read a bit earlier. Leviticus 25 details two laws decreed by God concerning land and human beings, laws which have deep, economic implications for the people of Israel, as well as deep, economic implications for the disciples of Jesus. The first law, which is described in the verses just before our lesson. The first law decrees sabbatical years for the land and is based on the understanding that God is the owner of all land. And so every seven years, the land is to have a Sabbath. It is to lie fallow in gratitude to God and so that God can restore vitality and fecundity to the land. And then after every 7th sabbatical year, 7 times 7 equaling 49, every 50th year is to be a year of Jubilee. And the Jubilee year involves a series of economic realignments that are almost impossible for us today to wrap our heads around. In a Jubilee year, slaves are freed to return home. In a Jubilee year, any property, whether it has been sold or taken, returns to the possession of its original owner or to the family who originally owned it 50 years before. Those who have accumulated much are required to return their wealth to those from whom it came, and those who have lost what they once had, whether that loss is through neglect or theft or laziness or whatever, they are to have their property and resources restored to them.

Now, my mind wants to run to the legal nightmare a Jubilee year would be today, but to view this massive economic reordering only from today's perspective is to miss the point. The theological foundation of this reordering is God's desire for God's people to live in equality where there are neither rich or poor, but where all have enough to sustain themselves and their family. And where all understand that everyone, everyone, without exception, is completely and totally and utterly reliant on God because God is the one to whom all things belong. God is the one to whom all land belongs because God created it in the first place. and because of this reality, God is also understood as the creator of all economic activity. And as such, God gets to establish the ways in which human economic activity is carried out. The words of the doxology we sometimes sing sum up well the centrality of God in the world's economic ordering. Praise God from whom all blessings flow. And all this Jubilee year stuff certainly seems a bit wild. Biblical scholars are not sure that actual sabbatical years or actual Jubilee years ever occurred in Israel's history. They're not sure that they ever existed as more than a theoretical hope. But for our purposes, reality or hope are beside the point for when Jesus instructed his disciples to pray this way, the economic foundation upon which His prayer instruction is built is that equality-- the radical equality of God's decree in the year of Jubilee is that equality is what God wants for us, what God expects of us, that Jubilee year when land and property is restored, that jubilee year when debts are forgiven-- financial debts and physical debts, and above all, spiritual debts like sins. In this kind of year -this Jubilee year- God's heavenly kingdom, God's beloved community come on Earth is like nothing we have ever experienced is like nothing we can even begin to imagine. And yet God's expected equality is what disciples of Jesus-- is what you and I are expected to live out each and every day in every one of our actions. Jesus' prayerful message to us is clear. God pays attention to the debts we incur, the debts we incur through our words and through our actions. And God pays attention to the debts we incur that harm others economically.

Wow, this is not where I anticipated this sermon was going when I outlined it several weeks ago and gave it to Bill so he would be able to connect it to the music. But I always love how the Holy Spirit disrupts my best-laid plans, my best thought out, ideas with ideas of her own. I love how the Holy Spirit uses what we as God's people offer up to instead make God's purposes and God's priorities clear to us, clearer than our own priorities. For our spiritual homework this week, I invite us all to intentionally explore the economic implications of discipleship. What does God's economics mean for those of us who have a lot of possessions and resources in a world where most only know some level of scarcity? How do God's economic expectations invite us individually and all together as a congregation to live and to spend and to share differently? What might a Jubilee year look like as a spiritual discipline for us as disciples? I believe Jesus invites us to pray this way so that we can never forget that God is the creator and the owner of all and so that we never forget our connections, our interrelatedness to all people everywhere and so that we can never forget Jesus' expectations that disciples share what we have so that no one has to live on a razor's edge of sustainability and survivability every day, but that instead, they may know the glorious and abundant feast that is the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen.