

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”
Leviticus 25:1-11a; Matthew 6:9-13
Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

Some people say “trespasses,” others say “sins,” but we Presbyterians say “debts.” Back in the day, when I was attending a rural public school in South Carolina, we started every single school day—first grade through twelfth grade—with the Lord’s Prayer, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance, sprinting through them one right after the other without taking a breath as a kind of preliminary warm-up race for the day’s arithmetic lessons and spelling tests. My school was a sea of Baptists sprinkled with a smattering of Methodists, so when it came to “forgive us our…” we said “trespasses.” But I have been a Presbyterian all my life. I said “debts” when I prayed at church and when we prayed in our family devotionals at the dinner table at home, and so when we prayed “trespasses” at school, there wasn’t a day that I didn’t feel like some kind of religious imposter. (It was similar to the way that I felt when I moved to Missouri and started saying “soda” for what had always been “Coke” to me in the South. I learned to say “soda,” but I always felt like a Midwest imposter.) So all through elementary and high school, I said “trespasses” when I knew that “debts” was really the right word to say. And then I went off to college, a *Presbyterian*-related college, and the first time that I went to chapel, we came to “forgive us our…” and I automatically said “trespasses” because it was school, after all, and not church, but everybody else or at least the person at the mic and, of course, the person who has got the mic has got the *power*, you know!—she, and the entire ocean of voices in the room, it seemed to me, rose up in a breaker-sized wave and crashed over my head as the word “debts” roared in my ears. And I thought, wow, this is great! It’s almost as good as Myrtle Beach! All these Methodists and Baptists and Episcopalians and even Catholics, for heaven’s sake, and now they’re having to say the Lord’s Prayer the right way.

Presbyterians say “forgive us our debts,” and one day, our member Jim Brueggemann’s father Walter was discussing how to translate the Lord’s Prayer with Jim’s grandfather, Dr. P.D. Miller, a distinguished dean of Southern Presbyterian preaching in years past. And Dr. Miller said, “I would rather have my debts forgiven than my sins.” (1) (I think this comment indicates that Jim must have been predestined to be DCPC’s Finance Chair, don’t you?)

When we pray “forgive us our debts,” we are speaking in the vein of Dr. Miller’s comment and using economic language. Saying “debts” is not really a Presbyterian thing; it’s a Matthew thing. When we use the word “debts,” we are following Matthew who uses the Greek word that is rightly translated “debts” when he records the model prayer that Jesus taught the disciples, rather than Luke who uses a different word that is

translated as “sins” in Luke 11. When we pray “forgive us our debts,” we are using language that relates to money and property and wealth.

“Forgive us our debts” is rooted in the Old Testament lesson from Leviticus 25. The petition is rooted in Moses’ announcing to Israel God’s will for money and property and wealth through the concept of Jubilee. In Leviticus 25, the Hebrews are instructed that it was God’s will that every fifty years, you have to give people back the land and other property that was originally theirs, but that they may have lost in the economic downturn. You are to give it back even if you obtained it in an entirely legitimate and legal manner, and you hold the deed on it free and square. You have to give it back, because ultimately, in the eyes of God, the wealth, the land, the property isn’t yours, it’s theirs....or, more precisely, it doesn’t belong either to you or to them, it belongs to God. Jubilee is an economic fruit basket turnover which gets started with the blast of a trumpet, *yabal* in Hebrew from which the word *jubilee* comes. The *yabal* sounds, not unlike the opening bell that launches daily trading on Wall Street, and everybody begins to dash around, returning property, canceling debts, in a mad scramble, only the scramble is not to acquire and accumulate more, but to break the cycle of acquisition and accumulation. (2)

The concept of Jubilee makes a huge and countercultural theological point: that God wills for us to live and act, ever and always, not toward our own self-interest, but toward the interest of our neighbor.

God wills for us to live toward neighborliness, toward community, toward the building of relationships with one another, and the place to start, Jesus taught us, is in our praying.

You know, I have been praying the Lord’s Prayer all my life. In school. At church. All by myself and with other people. But I will confess that moving through the Lord’s Prayer, phrase by phrase and week by week, has unsheathed how much my heart resists the words that trip so nimbly from my tongue.

Our Father, I have prayed. *Our*, not *my*, I have prayed, attesting to the community which God wills, but do I really want to give my entire life over to the kinds of loving relationships with folks who live on the margins that Jesus gave himself to? *Thy* kingdom come, I’ve prayed, but do I really want to relinquish the mic, so to speak, that is, to loosen my grip on whatever little bit of power and control I can wield in my little kingdom? Give us this day our *daily* bread, I’ve prayed, resolving before God through my words, anyway, that as my first gift to the world I will take only the share of food that my body needs to live, and not one calorie more. Is this a prayer that I am truly asking God to answer? A quick peek into my pantry and my fridge provides an answer to that question.

And now we come to the phrase, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” And I think of what I, what we, are praying for: that things will be set right in the world, not only economically where grinding poverty is a next-door neighbor to great

wealth, but also between people who have inflicted and sustained deep hurt one upon another and hold onto those grudges and those hurts in the tight fists of our hearts. I think of this, and I will confess that I find it very hard to envision how the Jubilee for which I am praying is really, truly going to get pulled off, even by God, in a world that is so seriously off-center.

But a few days ago, I remembered something that happened that gives me reason to hope. I was having dinner with some friends in San Antonio where Gary and I had gone for a visit. One of my friends started talking about the most powerful sermon she had ever heard. It happened in a class that had been offered at the church I served there. If I recall correctly, we named the class something like “Preachers on Preaching.” We invited the local “big name” preachers in town to be our guests for the class, to preach a sermon during the first hour, and then during the second hour of the class to discuss the sermon and how the preacher became a preacher and how the preacher studied for, wrote, and delivered sermons.

One of our guests in that cavalcade of preachers was the Rev. Thurman Walker, the pastor of Antioch Missionary Baptist Church in San Antonio. The text for his sermon that night was Joshua 6 where the story is told of how Joshua fought the battle of Jericho. In his powerful call-and-response preaching style, he punctuated his sermon with the refrain, “Remember the God of your past.”

“Remember the God of your past,” he preached, launching into a powerful recitation of the God who brought African-Americans through slavery and through the Civil Rights movement and carries them still today. It was a powerful word to hear from Rev. Walker, but also a very hard word for me to hear because for me to remember the God of *my* past is to remember the God that some of my South Carolina ancestors, devout Presbyterians every one, appealed to in their earnest, yet horribly misguided, justification of segregation and perhaps even slavery.

This debt, this sin, is a part of who I am. This debt, this sin, is a part of my story for the privileged life in which I grew up was derived from it, often indirectly, but sometimes all too directly. This debt, this sin, is a part of my story that is the polar opposite of Thurman Walker’s story, and yet, in the mystery and power and grace of Rev. Walker’s preaching, and ultimately the mystery and power and grace of God, there was a powerful and palpable sense in which his story and my story came together in a kind of holy convergence, if you will, and were gathered up together in the story of the One who taught both him and me to pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

When I was at dinner the other night, my friends and I were talking about how deeply Rev. Walker, who died of cancer at the age of 50 a few months ago, had spoken to us. But what I remembered even more was what happened in the second hour, after his preaching was done. I was acting as the moderator for the discussion, and I told him some of what I have just shared with you. And after I had finished, he did something that made my heart lurch. He reached over and touched my knee ever so gently, and if you had asked me in that moment or if you ask me now if it was Thurman Walker’s touch or

the loving and forgiving touch of Christ himself, then I would be hard pressed to explain the difference. What I felt in that momentary touch was nothing less than the answer to my prayer, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” What I felt was the knowledge that in Christ, there is no debt, no sin that we have committed or had committed against us, no injustice that we have suffered or inflicted upon another, no hurt or harm that we have sustained or caused another, that cannot be forgiven. In Christ, who is himself Jubilee, sin, trespasses, debt, however you name it, does not have the last word.

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

So Jesus teaches us to pray, in order that we might so live.

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Inscribing the Text: Sermons and Prayers of Walter Brueggemann*, edited by Anna Carter Florence (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 27.
2. *Ibid.*