

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Pentecost 15
September 13, 2020

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we all have a debt we owe.

And I am not talking about the mortgage payment we might have on our home.

We all have a debt we owe.

And I am not talking about our monthly car payment to be paid to some lending company.

We all have a debt we owe.

And I am not talking about our school loan, or our outstanding balance on our credit card, or some unpaid medical bill.

We all have a debt we owe.

Even the wealthiest persons on earth...

Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon...

Bill Gates, co-founder of Microsoft...

Warren Buffet, bank investor...

Even the wealthiest persons on earth have a debt they owe.

But the debt I am referring to is not measured in dollars.

No, the debt I am referring to is not paid by check or money order or by paypal or online banking.

No, the debt I am referring to is a debt of thanks.

Everyone, the world-over, is in debt to God.

We are in debt because God who has created us and has given us life, has all the more redeemed us in his Son Jesus Christ by the power of his death on the cross and subsequent resurrection.

We have a debt we owe, because we have been bought with an incredible price, that price being the blood of Jesus Christ.

And so, it is debt that can never be paid even with all the money in the world.

It is debt that can never be met by silver bars or gold bullion.

We owe an amazing debt of gratitude for what God in Jesus Christ has done for us.

God has given his Son to die for us.

PAUSE

And our gospel message today alludes to this enormous debt, owed by us, when it says that a particular servant of a king owed 10,000 talents.

Now, for those of us who may not know what 10,000 talents equates to, let's do the math.

Now a denarius, an ancient Roman silver coin...

A denarius was a day's wage for a common worker.

In today's world, at \$7.25 an hour, that being the minimum wage, a denarius would equate to \$58.

\$58 dollars would be the daily minimum wage for a person who worked an eight-hour day.

So we could say that a denarius, that Roman silver coin, in today's market would be worth \$58 dollars.

In antiquity, the purchasing power of a denarius was such that a person could buy 15 pounds of wheat with one denarius.

Now, a talent is another unit of money, and in antiquity a talent was equal to 6,000 denarii.

A talent was the equivalent to 20 years of daily wages for a six-day workweek.

In terms of money today, one talent would be equal \$348,000.

And so 10,000 talents would be the equivalent of...move the decimal point over four places to the right...

It would be the equivalent of 3.48 billion dollars.

3 billion, 480 million dollars.

Now, I have no idea how the person in our gospel reading could run up such a debt.

How could a slave in antiquity be in arrears for that amount of money?

Maybe he was betting on the horses.

You know, the Kentucky Derby was last weekend.

Maybe he is the kind of guy who puts up a huge sum of money on the favorite like Tiz the Law, only to come up short.

Maybe he was dabbling in the stock market, and the companies he chose to invest in went bellyup.

Who knows?

But the long and short of it is, this slave owes an astronomical sum of money.

And when the king comes demanding the slave to pay up, what does the slave do, but fall to his knees and beg for mercy.

What else could he do? He certainly doesn't have 3.48 billion dollars in his pocket.

No, the slave acknowledges his fault and begs for mercy.

He says he will do right by his king, and will pay the debt back.

But, what is amazing is that the king doesn't say, "You bet you will pay it back."

The king doesn't say, "You will pay me back even it takes you the rest of your natural life."

No, the king says nothing of the sort.

The king instead says, “You know what? Forget about it. I forgive you the debt you owe me.”

Wow. Now, we would be excited if the debt on our credit card, or the balance on our car loan, were forgiven.

But here we are talking about 3.48 billion dollars.

It’s gone. Wiped clean. No more cloud hovering over the slave’s head.

Wow. Talk about abundant mercy.

In short, in this gospel reading, God says each of our lives is worth easily 3.48 billion dollars.

And God redeems then each of our lives, paying off our debt.

Indeed, God says he will redeem our lives by the blood of his own Son.

So then, the slave in our gospel reading is redeemed, forgiven his huge debt.

But then this same slave goes out to one of his fellow slaves and demands payment for what he owes.

And the amount owed is 100 denarii, the equivalent of \$5,800.

No small chump change, but hardly 3.48 billion dollars.

And this slave begs for mercy, that he might have time to pay back what he owes.

But the slave who has just been forgiven 3.48 billion dollars does not show the least amount of forgiveness toward his fellow slave.

Instead he has his fellow slave thrown into prison, until he would pay what he owes.

PAUSE

And we shake our heads in wonder.

Now, mercy, forgiveness, compassion, grace, benevolence, generosity, pardon—no matter what we call it, we can’t deny that what God does for us in Christ is beyond both what we could possibly imagine or deserve.

God’s economy is strange to us.

Indeed, it doesn't make sense, which is perhaps why the slave who has just been forgiven is unable to forgive his fellow slave.

The math doesn't add up.

Nobody, who is anybody, would maintain their ledger in this way.

Nobody, who is anybody, would balance their accounts in this fashion.

Nobody, who is anybody, would simply erase the balance owed them as creditors.

Nobody, except God.

And so we see what kind of God we are dealing with.

God is not cruel nor pitiless, demanding from us the very last drop of sweat from our brow to make ourselves right with God.

No, God forgives such that we can be at peace with God.

But Friends, we must not forget, we **MUST NOT FORGET** that God is also just, and God's justice demands that we be forgiving with one another.

God will not be taken for granted, that is God's justice. This is what our parable is trying to teach us.

Yes, God will be merciful, but God expects us to be merciful to one another, otherwise we make a mockery of God's mercy.

And so, there are two sides to God, and because of these two sides, it can seem like God is schizophrenic or bi-polar.

Just look at our gospel reading.

God shows an abundance of compassion by forgiving the slave his debt, and then turns around and has the same man tortured when that man won't forgive his fellow slave.

What we need to remember is that there are two sides to God—God is merciful and forgiving, but God is also just and exacting.

So often, we struggle with an accurate understanding of God, because we focus either on one side of God or the other.

At times, we focus on God's abundant merciful, and as such we think we can live and do as we please because God will forgive us.

And so we take advantage of God's goodness.

We think to ourselves that God is going to forgive us anyway, no matter what we do.

At other times, we get caught up with the justice side of God.

And, we think that we can never live up to the standards of God and we despair of even trying.

We think God's justice is just too difficult to meet, and so we wash our hands of it, thinking what's it matter if I can't live up to God's justice.

But herein lies the problem, Friends. We think of God as one thing or the other.

We think of God as all-merciful, all-forgiving, a pushover, if you will, like some kind of milk toast, as my grandmother use to say.

Or we think of God as just and exacting, like some kind of heavy-handed overlord.

It is hard to hold these two things together—that God is both merciful and just. It is hard to think of God as wielding both law and gospel.

And so, that is why I think it best that we picture God not as concepts—justice, mercy.

But instead, we picture God as a person, as his Son Jesus Christ, with whom we called to be in relationship.

Think of God as relationship.

And would you want to be in relationship with a person who is easily taken advantage, who has no spine, who is intimidated, who is a pushover, who forgives, forgives, and forgives some more, who never stands up for him or herself?

And on the other side, would you want to be in relationship with a person who is too demanding, too exacting, such that everything with that other person becomes a tit for tat, such that the other is always expecting something from the relationship, such that they always want to know what is in it for them?

No, on both accounts.

Instead, if we think of what we would want in a healthy-relationship with another person—to be forgiven when necessary by that other, as well as the expectation from that other that we be responsible to that other, that we strive to do right by them.

If we think in this way, then we will get a true sense of what God is like through that relationship.

God is merciful and God is just. God is healthy relationship.

So, when we forgive another person seventy-times, it does not mean that we should be pushover.

Sometimes people make mistakes over and over again. It may not be intentional. It may not be malicious. And hopefully, they are sincerely trying to do better.

And so, we need to forgive.

But we don't forgive a person 77 times because we are pushover.

We forgive 77 times because we are responsible to that other person, and want to do right by them, and that is what it means to be committed to the other in relationship.

The relationship is everything, and we try as we may to stay committed to the other in relationship.

Remember then, God values you more than the sum of 3.48 billion dollars.

What value would we put on each of our relationships?

Amen.