

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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June 12, 2016

1 Kings 21:1-21a

Luke 7:36-50

DEBTORS

We have a story about a debt that cannot be repaid. In that time there were no bankruptcy laws, so this is a serious situation that could lead to one going to debtors prison. A debt that can't be repaid, however, can be forgiven. So it was natural imagery for Jesus to use. He is speaking about debt, but talking about forgiveness, which when we get down to it is that which leads to a restoration of relationship. It is releasing any claim on someone else for a past injury or offense. But it is more than that. When we are forgiven, the act also gives us back ourselves. After carrying such a heavy debt that can't be repaid, knowing ourselves as primarily someone who has come up short, a sinner – this identity can come to dominate us. We end up being the mistakes we have made. But the restoration that comes with forgiveness can set us free - it opens up our future.

So Jesus tells a story about forgiveness. What led to his story is that a woman who for some reason was understood to be a person who had come up short by her behavior, comes as an uninvited guest to a dinner where a religious official was hosting Jesus. Her expressions of gratitude to Jesus led to an awkward situation. Simon, the host, begins to judge Jesus harshly, thinking that if he were a true person of insight, he would realize what kind of woman this was who was crying and kissing at his feet. So Jesus tells a story about forgiveness and the gratitude that forgiveness engenders. The story explains why the woman was acting the way she was since she was like someone who had been forgiven a debt greater than a whole year of wages.

But Jesus' story is also about judgment and a lack of gratitude. Jesus compares the woman's extravagant act of devotion to Simon's neglect. The host would not have been expected to wash Jesus' feet with his tears. But her extravagance makes clear the host's lack of hospitality, not even providing even the minimum of what a good host would normally provide for a guest.

So the story not only tells of someone who had been forgiven a huge sum. It also tells of someone who had been forgiven a smaller sum. Perhaps, someone like Simon, who may not have realized that he owed anything to anyone. So in focusing his disdain on someone who needed to be forgiven a lot, this Simon did not see his own need to be forgiven. He was not ready to receive the remedy for what he lacked, and he would not experience the gratitude of those who have received a grand gift. He had invited Jesus over, but had shown him no hospitality. Had he invited him over in true interest about him or as an occasion to show his disdain? He ends up harshly judging both the woman and Jesus.

This story then tells not just the half about someone who recognizes their need who graciously receives their heart's desire and can live out their loving gratitude. It also tells about the other side, the tragic situation where someone understands himself/herself to be so self-sufficient that they can never know the joy of receiving a gift, and therefore have a truncated life absent genuine gratitude and love. The woman knows she desperately needs forgiveness and it comes as sheer blessing. The other character mistakenly is pretty sure he doesn't need it.

The true power of this story comes in our response to it. We understand fairly quickly that Simon is the bad guy here, the one who is judgmental, who isn't really into the forgiveness Jesus offers. And so quite naturally, we find ourselves judging Simon. And then we come to realize that we are Simon, with a similar penchant for looking down on someone else who needs forgiveness. At that point, we can recognize that we too are sinners, like the woman and like Simon. And the choice is to receive and rejoice or to reject and resent. Do we recognize

our need to be forgiven so we can receive God's embrace or do we reject our failings and with that rejection also turn away from God's gracious approach? The forgiveness of sin is only good news for those who recognize their need and want it.

I heard once about a pastor of church who had planned a relaxed evening with his wife at a nice restaurant to celebrate her birthday. They met at the church at the end of the day and headed out the door to the parking lot. However, just outside the church they encountered a crisis in progress. An elderly man and his wife had been walking by the church, and the man had evidently suffered a heart attack. He was lying on the sidewalk and his wife was bending over him, frightened and desperate. The minister rushed over to the man while the minister's wife was calling for an ambulance. The pastor loosened the man's collar, reached out for his hand, and said, "Try to relax. We're right here with you and an ambulance is on the way." To the pastor's surprise and puzzlement, the man looked up at him and said, "Forgive me, Charlie." The pastor did not learn until later that Charlie was the man's son and that father and son had been estranged for many years. The pastor squeezed the man's hand reassuringly and said, "I am not Charlie. My name is Sam. I'm a minister and I'll stay here with you until help comes. Don't be afraid." But the man responded in an urgent voice, "Charlie, please. Forgive me." "I'm not Charlie," repeated the pastor. "Stay calm now, and we'll get you to a hospital soon." Abruptly the man's breathing changed and his face turned ashen. It was becoming apparent that his condition was very grave and that he would not make it to the hospital. He whispered, "Charlie, I'm begging you. Please forgive me." It was now clear to the pastor what he must do. He embraced the dying man and said, "I forgive you. I forgive you." A look in the man's eyes signaled that he had heard these words. Then his breathing stopped, and he was gone. The next day the pastor wondered and worried about what had happened. What right had he to speak a word of forgiveness on behalf of the man's son? What right had he, a stranger, to speak words of forgiveness when the brokenness was still ongoing, when father and son were not reconciled?

Gradually it came to him that his entire ministry, indeed all of the Christian life, is this way. We are always living God's future in a broken present, the gospel is always a word of reconciliation from God's future spoken ahead of its time. As for the past, God knows and remembers our sin. As for the future, God remembers our sin as forgiven. As for the present, we have the opportunity to forgive one another out of gratitude that God in Christ has forgiven us.¹ We live a story about a debt that cannot be repaid. It grips us whether we acknowledge it or not. We can reject and resent that we are debtors in need. Or as forgiven and forgiving debtors, we can know the joy of being restored to who we really are as beloved children of God, and grateful sisters and brothers to one another.

When we are being Simon, that rejecting and resenting person we each have the capacity to be, let's not listen to what Simon says. Listen instead to the possibility opened by what Jesus says. We as sinners, as debtors, can be forgiven, opened to restored relationship, living lives of deep gratitude and grace. When the Simon within you is whispering in your ear, in this case, do not do what Simon says.

¹Thomas G. Long, "To Err is Human; to Forgive ...?" in Forgiveness, Christian Reflection, pp. 29-35, 2001 by The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University.