

Ascension Lutheran Church

Pastor Hollmann's Sermon for the week of October 26, 2008

Debt Free (Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36)

I recently read a true story about a young man who received a strange birthday gift. It turns out that when this young man reached his twenty-first birthday, the promising age of adulthood, his father gave him a bill. The bill was a record kept by his father of all the expenses connected with his son's youth. The bill was detailed, item by item, and included everything from the hospital fees for his birth, to his daily meals, and the clothes he wore for all those years.

Now I don't want to give fathers here any similar ideas. Tempting, perhaps, as this sounds, it also shows what a crazy bottom line driven payback world we live in. Can you imagine it? Maybe you can: your father or mother hands you a bill one day for all that you owe them for raising you.

Well this story, and all the news right now about the credit crisis and the problem of debt got me thinking about what we owe others. What do we owe one another, our parents, our spouses, other close family members? And what do we owe God, our Creator, from whom comes every good and perfect gift?

We pray in the Lord's Prayer that our Heavenly Father would forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Old translations of the Lord's Prayer read, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

Jesus summed up our debt to God and to another in the Gospel of Matthew. We heard this passage in last week's sermon, and here it is again. Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind. And the second greatest commandment is this, to love our neighbours as ourselves.

These two commandments summarize perfectly the entire Law of God. Love God, Love neighbour. We love God with everything we that we are, with everything we have. This is our debt to God who gives us the breath of life; our debt to God, in whom we live and move and have our being. And we owe our love to those whom God has provided in our lives, owe our love to all humanity, all those created like us in the image and likeness of God.

Of course we all know from personal experience that it's really, really hard to love God with everything we are, with everything we have. It's really, really hard to love our neighbours as ourselves. In fact, it's often really, really hard just to love ourselves, to even see ourselves as created in the image of God, as important to God and to others.

Just think how hard it is to concentrate on God all the way through saying the Lord's Prayer, or how easy it is to complain to a loved one. We all know what buttons to push with those closest to us, what words hurt, what tone will crush them to our will.

We fail to perfectly love God and love each other. And so we incur debts. We can't follow God completely today. That's a charge against us. We can't encourage our friends tomorrow. That's another charge against us. We can't love our enemies next week, whomever our enemies may be (just fill in the blank), That is yet another charge. It adds up quick and soon we're buried in debt.

And that debt puts us in the red when it comes to our balance sheet, our budget with God. It can lead to panic. A run on the bank of our good intentions. We might try to please God by doing something superstitious, anything that will keep God happy with us. How can we ever make these monthly payments to God? And worse, there may even follow depression; there's no hope. We can't keep up.

Debt and memory go together. Debt only works with memory. Credit card companies record something we purchase to remember it, to mark it, to process it, to legally state it so we have to repay it.

Because of our fallen condition, our sins, our debts keep piling up. They just don't go away by themselves. There's a record of our wrongs, our sin, our debts to God and to one another: "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." When there's a record, there's a reckoning.

Well, if debt comes with memory, forgiveness comes with forgetfulness. We all know how God takes care of our debt load, this is the central story of that adventure book, the Bible.

God the Father sent his Son, the Redeemer, a word drawn from the language of debt and repayment, of satisfaction and substitution. Jesus, the redeemer takes on our day of reckoning, our due day, through his death on the cross that first Good Friday.

Jesus, the redeemer, redeems or buys back our debt from that unholy alliance of sin, death and the devil. It's kind of like Jesus is the ultimate government bailout plan. He buys back our faulty loans, our insincere and un-kept promises to follow him and serve others, and gives us a new start.

For our reading today from Romans tells us that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. And the wages of sin, a money word, is death. Sin buys you death. And where there's sin and death, there's the devil, separation from God.

Paul tells us in our reading from Romans we are justified, made righteous, forgiven, as a gift through the redemption or the buy back of Jesus the redeemer. Jesus redeems us by shedding his blood, giving his body to death through his sacrifice.

In fact, Jesus becomes the debt, the sin itself. Jesus does more than just buy us back, he actually becomes that debt, takes it on to such a level that God forsakes him, forgets him.

God is holy and debt free. He can't stand the debt Jesus becomes on the cross. And so Jesus cries out: "My God, My God why have you forsaken me." And yet, that divine forsaking, that cosmic forgetfulness allows Jesus to pay the penalty for our debt to God.

Jesus says on the cross right before he dies. "It is finished." The debt is paid. After the debt is paid there's a clean sheet, a balanced budget, a new beginning. The old has gone, the new has come. There's the resurrection. Jesus lives.

Through Jesus our old memories begin to be replaced by a new mind serving God. In Christ, our minds, Paul tells us our being renewed by the Spirit of God.

Take for instance the story of Mary Magdalene at the tomb that first Easter morning. Mary thinks she sees the gardener. It turns out it's Jesus. Jesus calls her by name. Mary recognizes the Lord. Mary tries to cling to Jesus. She thinks this is the same as before. Jesus is around to stay. Yet, Jesus says he must ascend to his Father and now our Father.

Through Jesus death, payment of debt, through his resurrection, our guarantee of new life, we have a direct relationship with God our Father. And Jesus ascends to the right of hand of God the Father so that he can be with his people everywhere through his Word and Sacraments.

By the power of God we are children of God. Jesus, the Son, remains forever, as we hear in our Gospel reading this morning. He is the living Lord. And in Jesus we are sons and daughters of God our Father.

It's a loving relationship. A loving relationship which Jesus wants us to continue in by remaining connected to him through church, reading the Bible, our prayer life and our acts of service. How's your devotional life? We all need a friendly reminder from God.

Remember that story the story of that young man who on his twenty-first birthday received a bill for all the money he owed his father for years of living under his roof. His Father remembered, kept track of what his own owed, and charged him the cost of living for twenty years. I'm not sure what happened to this family, but my guess is after all this record keeping nothing was ever the same again.

A relationship of love, of giving, doesn't demand to be paid back. Our parents didn't give us a bill for their love. We respect and honour the love they give us.

Love doesn't keep track. God loves us and through Jesus doesn't remember our wrongs. Love, is not a record of wrongs, a score sheet of debt, a listing of sins. Love, Paul tells us in First Corinthians chapter thirteen, does not go its own way. Instead, love goes the way of God and the way of our neighbours.

Love is patient, love is kind. "Faith, hope, and love, these three remain, but the greatest of these is love." For God is love. The Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father all the way to death. The Spirit is the bond of love between Father and Son and us.

That's what the reformation is all about. We are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone. We can't pay the debt of our sin to God. But Jesus pays the debt for us. And Jesus, the redeemer makes us children of God.

We have a loving debt free relationship with God. And God empowers us by His Spirit to model the relationship of love we have with him with our families, and with this community of faith. Through the Word of God the Holy Spirit is still reforming us today to be debt free. Forgiven in Jesus alone, given to each other.

And so we thank God by remaining connected to Jesus. We love God through an active prayer and devotional life, and we serve one another. It's not easy, it's a struggle. But, then, reformations never were easy. Amen