

“Forgive Us Our Debts”

October 8, 2023

Based on Matthew 6:8-13. The Prayer of Jesus.

The sermon topic request was stark: Forgiveness, it read. HELP!

My guess, although I do not know for sure, is that this plea relates to forgiving someone else. Someone has caused great harm to the one requesting this sermon topic. How in the world can we forgive when we are still wounded by the hurt?

There are really good responses to that plea. But they will have to wait until next week. Any discussion of forgiveness that is rooted in The Way of Jesus must first begin where Jesus does in our Lesson today: praying forgiveness for ourselves.

Forgive us our debts, Jesus says, in Matthew’s Gospel, and yes he means debt as economic burden, the same way you and I might think of that word, with our credit cards and our student loans and our auto payments all exacerbated by rising interest rates. Forgive us our debts, we pray in the Presbyterian version of The Prayer of Jesus, which means we literally ask God whenever we pray this prayer to remove the economic burden that keeps us from flourishing financially.

The same is true in the first century Jewish life of Jesus, with an added indigenous twist: in first century Jewish life, the economic burden of debt is inextricably intertwined with external colonization of the land. The gifts of the land, filled with promise and plenty, are more than sufficient to provide for the people of the land. Instead, absentee landowners have gobbled up the vineyards and multi-national corporations have commercialized the fishing. Consequently, in order to survive, the people of the land end up drowning in debt they have no hope to repay.

Moses, himself, in that first Sermon on the Mount, many millennia before Jesus, foresees these challenges of mutual thriving in the land. Yes, the land of promise and plenty offers every gift we need to thrive. Yes, life happens, even without external colonization, leading to debt and loss of land and loss of livelihood. But right there, in the heart of Torah, lies the gift of Jubilee. Every fifty years, a great redemption is meant to occur, when all debts are forgiven, all land is redistributed according to need, and everyone gets a rest, human and more-than-human alike.

This is the kind of collective forgiveness to which Jesus refers when he teaches us to pray forgive us our debts. Collective forgiveness means redistribution of the gifts of the land - including economic - in order that all life may flourish in the land. The entire Prayer of Jesus is, in fact, one great resurrected Prayer for Jubilee among people who seem to have given up hope on the idea. It is a mutual forgiveness, for which they - and we - pray, a communal repair of historical harm, a reset button that gives everyone a second chance for shared flourishing.

This prayer for a second chance at shared flourishing ripples throughout the Presbyterian denomination this Indigenous Peoples’ Sunday, as we celebrate the cultures and traditions native to the Americas, while also repenting for the historical harm of colonization perpetuated, in large part, by our denomination. To that end, denominational leaders are this very moment delivering apologies on our behalf directly to Native American and Alaskan Native communities, specifically for our role in preaching theological support for the Doctrine of Discovery - which claimed Christian ownership of any land that was not already Christianized - and the

development of Indian boarding schools, in cooperation with the U.S. government's Indian assimilation movement. Efforts to repair this harm are under consideration by our newly created Center for the Repair of Historical Harm.

You and I, of course, might resist this collective apology, wondering why they would need to apologize on my behalf? I had nothing to do with the Doctrine of Discovery, we might say. I had nothing to do with Indian boarding schools stripping indigenous children from their homes and their culture, we might insist. I oppose that now, and I would have opposed it then, if I could have, we might contend.

Therein lies the point of The Prayer of Jesus: acknowledging the contemporary collective impact of historic collective harm. We do not pray forgive me my debt. We pray forgive us our debt. The colonization of the land for first century Jews harmed everyone, colonizer and colonized alike. Likewise, the colonization of the Americas has harmed everyone, colonizer and colonized alike. The forgiveness is about repairing the harm, not about whether or not we personally have been bad.

The indigenous botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer, says something similar, in reminding us the role indigenous communities historically played in clearing the underbrush of Canadian forests. This summer during the wildfires, she says, you were breathing the smoke of genocide, whether or not you are indigenous to the land. The collective sin of the past now brings collective suffering in the present.

For us, too, the Prayer of Jesus to forgive us our debts is now a resurrected Prayer for Jubilee among us today, even as many of us seem to have given up hope on the idea that collective liberation on a planet that can continue to sustain itself is possible. This is why we must pray it over and over and over again, joining our voices with all who have prayed some version of this prayer, through many lands, for two millennia. We are desperate for a new way to be, God, please help us help you make it so.

Especially today, we join with those who pray this prayer in the land of Jesus, where rockets soar in terror and collective punishment responds in force. We insist, in the words of our mission partner, The Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theological Center in Jerusalem, that violence and war are never the answer. We confess, as well, the root causes of this violence, which include historic Christian anti-Judaism in Europe and North America culminating in the Holocaust, an imbalance of political power among the conflicting parties, colonization and occupation of those who lived on the land for generations much like Jesus experienced in his time, and the failure of world powers to insist upon a just, sustainable, and peaceful solution to a conflict we collectively helped create. We pray, dear God, with those who pray this prayer today in the land of Jesus: forgive us our debts. May your Jubilee come, now.

We are living in the world we are living in, Robin Wall Kimmerer says, while imagining a different one. This is the heart of The Prayer of Jesus, in the end, the only real hope for humanity, in my view, the predicate response to the plea for help in forgiving someone else for the great harm they have caused us.

Before we can begin to consider forgiving someone else for the harm they have done us - which we will get to next week! - we must confess our need for collective liberation. This world is so incredibly unjust. We are all of us desperate for redemption. And so, in The Way and in The Spirit of Jesus, we cling to the hope that a different world really can be possible when we pray for mutual forgiveness as a communal repair of historical harm, a reset button that gives everyone a second chance for collective flourishing, and a peace that truly does pass all understanding.