

“Indebtedness”
August 21, 2011
Grove Presbyterian Church

Old Testament Lesson

Leviticus 25: 8-14

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces. In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property. When you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not cheat one another.

The year of Jubilee. The Sabbath of years. On the seventh day you rest. Seven years times seven years equals the 49th year. The year of release. Those sold into indentured servitude because of indebtedness shall be released. Freed from captivity so they can be free for others, fully restored to family, clan, country. Pretty cool idea. Alas, there is no proof they ever did it.

New Testament Lesson

Philemon 15-22

Which brings us to this obscure little letter from Paul to Philemon. The background to this is the story of Onesimus. He's a runaway slave. Philemon's slave. Onesimus escapes and somehow ends up in Rome. All roads lead to Rome. Desperate, needy, he turns to Paul for aid, a man familiar to him from his slave days in Colossae. There Paul, himself under Roman house arrest, takes him in. There Onesimus, whose name means 'useful,' becomes useful to Paul, as well as his friend.

Faith, honesty, and integrity eventually persuade Onesimus that he must return to Philemon. His opportunity arises when Paul needs several letters carried and delivered to Colossae, Ephesus, and the surrounding churches. Paul adds another letter to the mail pouch. This one to Philemon. One of few rare letters written by Paul to a person.

And it is a lovely letter of appeal, appealing to Philemon's better nature to manumit his slave Onesimus. There is a difference between that which is legal and that which is decent.

Legally, Philemon should punish Onesimus: brand him on the forehead, break his joints, even crucify him.

There is another choice, as Paul petitions; Philemon could do the Christ-like thing and free him from his servitude. More than free him from his slavery; as both men are Christians, Philemon should love Onesimus as his brother -- out of respect for Paul, out of respect for Christ.

Christians always are called to go beyond what is merely legal.

Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

Reflection

Will my Philemon set me free too? I tell you, boys and girls, if they won't give me my emancipation, I'll sure find a way to set myself free whether Philemon likes it or not.

To be free. To be free from my bondage.

So when, my dear Lord, can we expect this year of Jubilee? The year of jubilo! I'm waiting for the ram horns to sound. Wouldn't it be grand to be freed from indentured servitude, all debts erased. Restored to full and equal citizenship.

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But, hold on a moment, it might be useful to distinguish between good debt and bad debt.

Good debt is debt – reasonable, affordable debt – that gives me a chance to live better than what my cash flow allows. Good debt – valued against what I have and who I am -- allows me to have my house, send my kids to college, help fund a wedding.

Bad debt is enslaving, ensnaring, enraging. Like the chronic crushing captivity of credit cards. Average debt load per borrower, as recently reported, is about \$5,000. Good news is that Late Payments have been reduced; the bad news, however, might suggest that most families are treading water. They are careful to make the necessary payments lest interest rates balloon to make the Mafia blush, but they lack the resources to pay off the balance.

Bad debt is crushing, especially for those without a cushion: the cushion of family or funds banked or likelihood of wages increasing.

Poverty is indeed a tar baby – I’ve made this comparison for years – the more Bre’r Rabbit struggles the stucker poor Bre’r Rabbit gets.

Good old humorist Will Rogers:

*“The money was all appropriated for the top in the hopes  
that it would trickle down to the needy.  
Mr. Hoover didn’t know that money trickled up.  
Give it to the people at the bottom  
and the people at the top will have it before night, anyhow.  
But it will at least have passed through the poor fellow’s hands.”*

We didn’t get here overnight.

We are paying today a bill due after decades of wanting what we want and wanting it right now -- not the least of which is bizarre, skewed accounting where one Ohio State season ticket price is \$170 to help pay for the \$2.5 million dollar salary of the college football coach. That \$170 is for five games, student price. Dear Lord, he’s only a coach and it’s only a game.

Woody’s Guthrie’s ‘Big Money Boys.’ That’s where you find the real sense of entitlement.

If it weren’t for WIC and food stamps and unemployment insurance and foreclosure mediation and social security, we’d be worse off than the food lines and shanty towns of the Great Depression. Child poverty has increased over the last decade (from 2000 to 2009) by 2.5 million children. 20% of our children live in poverty.

Who will set them free?

Most folk I know just want to work and take care of theirs. Kind of funny how Unions started to protect the right to work. After all, Woody suggested, the bosses had their own kind of union – called the Stock Exchange, Country Clubs, Government – why not the working stiff?

Isn’t there a problem when the third leading employer in Northumberland County is Northumberland County? With the State Government ranked number four?

Will Rogers again:

*We are the first nation in the history of the world  
to go to the poor house in an automobile.*

And this he said in 1952.

We have ignored Oliver Wendell Holmes's advice when he said, "Put not your trust in money, but put your money in trust."

We have violated what Frederick Douglass, himself a former slave, advocated as national moral principles. According to Douglass, "the principles of honor, integrity and affection" are the essential prerequisite for enduring success:

*"All human experience proves over and over again,  
that any success which comes through meanness, trickery, fraud and dishonour,  
is but emptiness and will only be a torment to its possessor."*

So it seems. So it seems.

So why is Standard and Poor's still given so much authority? Isn't this supposed to be the United States of America, not United States, Inc.? We are people not your property.

What I wonder is: why are the bankers in control of national policy? Why not the preachers, the poets, the plumbers, the folk musicians, the historians?

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Yet, perhaps, all this mess reveals something useful:

- ▲ the failure of a materialistic, economic view of life.
- ▲ the failure of a life driven by power and pleasure, gain and greed.
- ▲ the failure of a life whose worth is based upon "a mark, a yen, a buck, or a pound."
- ▲ the failure of a life whose first questions asks, "What's in it for me?"

"What does it profit a man to gain the whole world but forfeit his soul?"

-- Mark 8: 36

Yet we keep pounding on the door that has closed

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As much as I'd love to pay off my loans and get out of debt, I stand here nonetheless to say how much I cherish my indebtedness.

The debt I owe to others for investing in who I am.

No one is a self-made man.

- Who helped pay for my education?
- Who helped me put the down payment for my home?

We all stand on the shoulders of others. We all owe others.

We all live lives interlaced and interdependent. Like a cobweb, like pick up sticks. Move one, all others are affected. The wealthy will not long remain wealthy if the poor long remain the poor.

*"Properly speaking, there are in the world no such men as self-made men. It must in truth be said though it may not accord well with self-conscious individuality and self-conceit, that no possible native force of character, and no depth or wealth of originality, can lift a man into absolute independence of his fellow-men, and no generation of men can be independent of the preceding generation."*  
**-- Frederick Douglass**

I will blame myself for my personal failures, but I acknowledge I am who I am because of how I have chosen to respond to the influence of others. Teachers, my government, parents, friends, mentors, angels unawares, my children.

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Get beyond the exasperating headlines and finger-pointing talking points. Get beyond the vapid speeches and insipid slogans.

Ponder the positives surrounding.

These could be our finest days.

I still remain confident that our children's children will see the second Renaissance. The terror of constant war, the grim veneration of death, and the plagues that ravaged the 13th century, gave birth to the Western Renaissance of the 14th. So too, I remain steadfastly convinced, these long dark days which have driven us to our knees will raise us to a new age of light and fresh awakening, an age of a bright shining humanity.

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Cherish, embrace, celebrate your indebtedness. Your spiritual indebtedness. These could be our finest days. These times, with stress and humiliation, teach us to value the heart rather than the externals.

Valuing our spiritual connectedness.

Urging us to live in community.

To share.

To accept that unless you are free, I am not free

Coming to terms with limits.

Tired of living a divided self.

To rely on each other.  
Casting off fear as the place from which we make our decisions.  
Love always is the sounder investment.

Let my people go.

I know I am free. I know I am free and unafraid. I know I am free and unafraid and  
blessed beyond all measure.

For my identity and my worth depends not on anything the government or Big Money  
Boys say.