

The Debt of Gratitude

This sermon was preached at Sts. Peter and Paul Lutheran Church in Riverside, Illinois, on June 12, 2016, the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost and Graduate Recognition Sunday. The texts were Galatians 2:15-21 and Luke 7:36—8:3.

“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). I’ve often appreciated the way Jesus prays the Fifth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew’s Gospel: “Forgive us our debts... .” There are other ways of praying the Lord’s Prayer in the English language, for example, from Luke’s Gospel, “Forgive us our sins...” (Luke 11:4a). Of course, the most familiar to us is “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,” taken from the *Anglican Book of Common Prayer* (1662). For me, neither of the second two translations “gets real” in the same way as “forgive us our debts.”

Most of us in this room know what it means to carry the heavy burden of debt—credit card debt, medical bills, mortgages, student loans, personal loans, cell phone bills, utility bills, bank charges, auto loans, payday loans—to mention just a few. Sometimes these debts are with us for a lifetime. A recent study reveals that forty-seven percent of Americans do not have enough money in savings to cover a \$400 car repair or emergency medical bill; they would have to borrow the money from a family member, place it on their credit card, or take out a short-term loan.

In our economy, it seems, we like to get the burden of debt laid upon people at a young age, usually around the age of eighteen, the age of our proud high school graduates whom we are recognizing this morning—even those who have worked so diligently during the past four years in order to achieve some really great scholarships. Even these will soon be signing promissory notes for one sort of loan or another, including subsidized and unsubsidized federal loans; Stafford, Perkins and PLUS loans (one for the parents, too); private loans and health professional loans; and ultimately, I suppose, years from now, debt consolidation. Believe me, after almost ten years of paying tuition, I know student debt when I smell it!

Maybe you know that the average college graduate in the class of 2016 has amassed approximately \$37,000 in student loan debt, up six percent from just a year ago. Maybe this doesn’t seem like much to mortgage holders and people who have completed professional degrees, but it is for college graduates who have few good job prospects. So, we congratulate you, graduates! See what you have to look forward to. By the way, once you take out those loans, just watch as the dozens of credit card offers begin to flutter into the mail box every month at your permanent mailing address—the one where your parents live. The idea, I suppose, is to get you hooked early. We seem to like our people when they are in debt—shackled and chained for a lifetime just trying to keep up with the interest payments and whittling away, little by little, on the

principle.

When you think about it, we already have great debts, amassed long before the age of eighteen, debts which have nothing to do with banks. Our lives are so completely “on loan” to us from the moment we draw our first breath until our final one. Honestly, we never own a thing. There is nothing I should call “mine.” We with our graduates have already been loaned so much that has been “forgiven,” so much which we will never be required to pay back, so much that we have already received as pure gift.

Look at our list of graduates. I see that they have been given loving parents, grandparents, and extended families. They have grown up in safe homes and neighborhoods with every need provided for them. They have attended the finest schools which have offered a multitude of opportunities, more than they could possibly participate in. They were born with terrific talents and given the will to use these talents. They have such promising futures, despite what the fear mongers say. They have received the seedling of faith, planted in their young lives by the Holy Spirit of our Lord Jesus and his Father through Mother Church. Debtors all are we to the One who shares the gift of life with us.

“The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little” (Luke 7:47).

Today, we hear a story about two debtors. The scene is set for conversation amongst men who are privileged and educated, a sort of symposium where male guests gather exclusively to eat, drink and debate important topics of the day. On such an occasion, a good host would be expected to provide a basin filled with water for guests to wash their feet before the meal, especially if those guests had walked a long distance to arrive at their destination. Sometimes a host would provide oil for the sore, dry, cracking feet of his guests; but only a house slave would be expected to wash and anoint those feet. Simon the Pharisee provides none of these things for Jesus.

The irony of the situation here is that even though Jesus is a guest in Simon’s home, it is not he but the woman of the streets who extends hospitality to Jesus by doing the unthinkable—letting down her hair, kissing his feet, caressing them with oil. This woman is the good host, not the pharisee, because, Jesus infers, she was forgiven much; thus, she loves much. Great is her gratitude.

I suppose if you don’t believe you have been given anything in life, then you are not likely to be very grateful, if at all. If you think you’ve earned everything you’ve got, including that wonderful grade-point average, then you are never going to know how to say *Gracias!*

Graduates ought to be grateful, but they are not. The graduates who are the good, religious, *summa cum laude* folks get themselves into a snit. Simon speaks for them, “If this man were a real prophet, he would see what sort of woman this is. That she’s a sinner.” She didn’t even finished high school! This is the sort of response that many people, especially young people nowadays, expect to hear from Christians, a response that is judgmental, self-righteous, hypocritical, intolerant and condemning. No

surprise, then, that these young people are not interested in a brand of Christianity that has been “forgiven little—and so it loves little.”

Luke has already told us that the Pharisees have rejected John’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. They have decided that they don’t need release from any sins, and they presume that they are already good enough. So, it is a tale of two debtors, one who knows only too well her need. She sees Jesus as the one who has come to seek and to save the lost. The other smug debtor doesn’t have a clue about his sin, and he criticizes Jesus for not seeing how bad this woman is and how great he and his friends are. The pharisee can only see someone who has been labeled a sinner, and once we label people, we can see nothing more.

Another day, Jesus and his students were watching people come into the temple to make their offerings. Rich people brought huge bags of money to drop in the treasury. Jesus wasn’t impressed. Instead, he noticed a poor widow who only put in a little penny—because Jesus sees the heart. He told us, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on” (Luke 21:3, 4).

Jesus offered his forgiveness of debts by eating at a table surrounded by the likes of us—all of us who bear an insurmountable debt of gratitude to Jesus, the good host, a host who takes the form of a slave who washes our feet, anoints our wounds, and eats and drinks with us forever.

“So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:14).