

Sunday September 6th, 2020

PASTORAL PRAYER: Gracious and loving God, Lord of all creation, in your wisdom and grace you have made us dependent upon you and upon one another. You have made us in such a way that through our fellowship with other human beings, we discover our need for communion with you. We praise you, O God, for esteeming us so highly, endowing us so richly and trusting us so fully. We are humbled by your willingness to take such risks for our growth into mature human beings. We bless you for having seen in us more than we see in ourselves and for having done better by us than we do for ourselves.

You have called us to be your witnesses. All too often, we have failed your summons. Occasionally we have hated evil, held fast to the good, and been affectionately devoted to one another. Yet we have seldom been zealous in showing honour, patient in enduring tribulation, or generous in responding to our brothers and sisters. If we have denounced the flagrant abuses of those in power over us, we have winked at the vices of those who live around us.

For all these transgressions, whether by omission or commission, we ask your forgiveness, O God. But remind us again of the high cost of your forgiveness, lest we forget the magnitude of the task to which you have called us. You have called us to preach the good news to the poor. Yet the world swarms with the poor who have never heard the good news. You have called us to liberate the oppressed. Yet half the world's people have never known life without oppression. You have called us to set the prisoners free. Yet we continue policies that condemn persons to a life of bondage. Renew within us, dear Lord, our commitment to the victims of the world's injustice.

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Romans 13:8-14
“Time to Pay the Piper!”

I ran across a story about a lawyer’s dog that ran into a butcher shop and stole a roast. The butcher went immediately to the lawyer’s office and asked him, “If a dog is without a leash, and steals a roast from my store, do I have the legal right to require payment for the meat that was taken from me?” The lawyer answered the butcher, “Oh yes, absolutely.”

The butcher continued, “The dog in question was your dog, the meat was my meat, and according to your own advice-you owe me ten dollars for the meat your dog took from me today.” The lawyer agreed with the butcher, and immediately wrote the butcher a check for ten dollars. A few days later the butcher received a letter from the lawyer. The butcher opened the envelope and found an invoice for sixty dollars for the lawyer’s consultation fee.

Debts; we are all familiar with them, and in fact most of us have at least a few of them. We owe money to the banks for our loans, mortgages, and credit cards. We owe Norfolk County money for our property taxes, and Erth Solutions for our water bills and maybe if you are like most home owners in bugged cities you owe money for a garbage fee. We owe taxes to our provincial government, and of course our federal government. And I suspect that higher taxes are coming to pay for the covid fallout.

We all understand financial debt, especially when the sheer volume of it threatens to bury us. What most of us fail to appreciate, although we know it is a major part of our lives, is that we also carry a social debt. For example: we are responsible for our children when they are young and sometimes, we still feel obligated when they are adults. We feel an obligation to our spouses, to love them despite how they leave the dishes in the sink or clothes on the bedroom floor.

There is even a whole genre of humour based on the sense of indebtedness people feel once they are married. Such as the young man who was considering marriage and was speaking to his father about marriage. “Dad, why did you marry Mom?” His father contemplated the question for a moment and said, “I guess I felt like I was incomplete.” The son continued, “Do you feel like you are complete now?”

The father paused for a longer time and finally said, “Usually I feel complete; but sometimes I feel like I am finished!” We all understand this sense of indebtedness. We trade favours for each other, and sometimes we finish the transaction with the phrase, “You owe me!” “I helped you so now I expect a favour in return”. Even in the Lord’s Prayer we find this indebtedness where we read, “And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Our Presbyterian friends when reciting the prayer always render this phrase, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive those who are indebted to us.” Our Presbyterian friends have picked up on this sense of Christ’s compulsion that we are indebted to each other.

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So now we turn to the Apostle Paul, who in today's passage talks about one of our least favourite topics; debts. His first phrase is simple enough, "Pay all your debts".

In other words, if you owe somebody something, pay it. If you owe somebody or an institution something, pay it. In the world of financial transaction or other indebtedness we cannot shirk our responsibilities. The onus is all on our part. Nobody should have to chase after God's people to pay their bills. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Jesus said. We all like to receive what is owed to us in a timely fashion, why shouldn't we pay those we are indebted to us in a timely way.

Now this command that Paul lays out refers to debts we owe. Debts owed to us are another matter altogether. Jesus makes it quite clear that we are to forgive those indebted to us. It seems straight forward when it comes to things like owing someone a lunch at a restaurant, but how easy is it when the debt grows to higher levels. That being said we are still called on to forgive those indebted to us.

If you doubt this truth, just turn and read again the parable of Jesus in Matthew 18 where a King forgives a man owing a huge amount, only to have that same man throw someone indebted to him in jail. The point of the parable is that those of us forgiven by God a great debt, need to forgive those indebted to us, because their debt is minuscule compared to what God has already and will continue to forgive in us.

As difficult as this truth is about this kind of indebtedness, it is easy for us to understand. That is until the other shoe drops. The Apostle Paul continues in the same breath with these convicting words, "Pay all your debts, except the debt of love for others. You can never finish paying that!" Now I understand what it means if I owe my neighbour a few dollars or my friend a lunch out, but what is this debt of love and why can I never pay it off?" I guess I would begin by reminding us all of the eternal nature of love.

In 1 Corinthians 13:13, Paul writes, "There are three things that will endure-faith, hope, and love-and the greatest of these is love." By stating that these three endure, Paul is saying they are eternally present, both in the here and now; and on into eternity. When all other things pass away, love persists. The command to love our neighbour as ourselves is an eternal command. It never gets fully satisfied.

In fact, Paul quotes Jesus in stating that if you want to fulfill the law or rules of God as fully as you can, then you must be a person of love. You must be a person of love, every day, every minute, and every second of your existence. Love is the one thing that ensures that we satisfy God's requirements of us. I am sure you are aware that we Christians like to throw around the word "righteousness" a great deal.

We vaguely think the word means crossing every "t" and dotting every "i" of the rules God has set forth. We might even substitute the word righteousness for something akin to "right living". We might define the problems of this word as lack of "holiness" and it is easy to concur with all of this, except I think Jesus took it one step further.

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If you approach someone with the attitude that I must not murder him or steal from him or covet his car, then there is a cold calculating nature to your heart. Jesus makes it clear that Christian morality is more than an ethical calculation.

That's why Jesus drops the bombshell on legalism when he states in Matthew 5:21-22 these words, "You have heard that the Law of Moses says, 'Do not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.' But I say if you are angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you say to your friend, 'You idiot,' you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.'"

If that doesn't make you squirm, I don't know what will. Jesus and Paul are saying the same thing, "The Christian life isn't about what you know to be right and wrong, although knowledge in this area of helpful; the Christian life is all about the heart. If you want to please God, then your heart has to be a heart of love. And we are not talking about feel good kinds of love, but rather love that persists even when we don't feel like very loving.

Tony Campolo writes about the significance between deep abiding Christ centered love and love that is all feeling. These are his words which I remind you are from a male's perspective:

In our society, it is easy to get swept up in the mythology of romance. Most young people are sure that they will live happily ever after if they just marry "the right one." When they ask their mothers, "How will I know when I've met the right one?" The answer is always the same, "When you meet the right one-you'll know!"

As you can imagine, an answer like that doesn't help very much. The problems don't end there. Three weeks before the wedding, your mother is bound to ask you "Are you sure?" It's too late then. The wedding invitations are already out and the presents are coming in. Without question, you're dead meat. On the day of the wedding, in all likelihood, you'll look up the aisle and see a woman dressed in white-whom on this occasion you hardly recognize.

She'll be wearing a veil so you won't be able to see her whole face. You may see what appears to be a threatening smile aimed at you. And you will be asking the question, "God? What am I doing here?" Even if you are an atheist, at that moment God will speak to you. You'll probably here a voice saying, "Too late, sucker!"

It really doesn't make much difference, because all a wedding does is create the possibility for a marriage. Marriage is what you create after the wedding is over. It's something you decide to create. You wake up one morning and look across the bed. She won't be awake yet. Her mouth will be open and her hair will be hanging over her face. Worse than that, she will wake up first and look across the bed, and in your case, there may be no hair hanging down over your face.

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And romance takes a nose dive! That is when people can too easily split up. When I asked a friend of mine whether he and his wife had ever thought of divorce as the romance wound down, he answered, "Of course not. My wife and I have never considered divorce. Murder sometimes-but never divorce!" (Tony Campolo-Let me tell you a story, pg. 138)

Your debt, your covenant to your spouse and by extension all people, is not based on what looks good, feels good, or is convenient. True love as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13, is not about me, it is always about the other person. Why, do you think, Jesus and Paul set such a high standard for us? Wouldn't it have been easier to just lay out some rules and have everyone follow those?

Well God's people tried that didn't they? They had the whole package of the Law of Moses, plus hundreds of years of religious commentary, and still they remained far from God. What was sorely needed was what Jesus brought to us; namely a fulfilling of the law. What he represents, and what he taught, and what Paul faithfully passed on, was that to truly be God's children we must take on the characteristics of our Father.

I am sure that many of us have had the experience of someone noting on a family resemblance. We hear things like, "You have your father's eyes, or your mother's nose." "You are just like your father", another will say. When a characteristic appears in someone that seems out of place in our families, we hear things like I did all my life, "Where did you get that curly hair?"

People value connections to their families. We want to know that something of ourselves has been passed on. The same is true in God's family. God seeks not religiously observant beings but sons and daughters who display his character to the world. I wish we could read the entire first letter of John today because it directly talks about this family resemblance with God but let these two verses suffice for the moment.

"Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is born of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God-for God is love" (1 John 4:7-8) Do you see now why Paul and Jesus emphasized love? Love is the family characteristic that reveals to the world and to God, whose family we belong to. If as John writes, "we claim to love God but hate our brother", then we are a liar. We are a liar because if we can't love the people we see, how can we love God who we cannot see?

It is time to pay the piper, or time to pay our debt of love to our community. How can we refuse to take on the resemblance of our heavenly family; especially when our opportunity to be God's children was bought with such a high price? I quote John again who wrote these words.

"God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins."

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This perfect love demonstrated by Jesus is what we celebrate as a family today and what we commit to every time we take the bread and drink the cup. We are a family, God's family; bought and forged by the sacrifice of love at Calvary. It is time for our community to observe us and remark, "They are just like their heavenly Father."