

We Are Debtors

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So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Romans 8: 12-17

It’s not often that a pastor misses Pentecost Sunday, but sometimes it can’t be helped. It was a long-planned hiking trip with my family that did it one year. Our destination was Peru, the ancient ruins at Machu Picchu, long considered the famous lost city of the Incas. The city was discovered, or rediscovered actually, around 1911, by a larger-than-life American explorer named Hiram Bingham. He paid a young Peruvian boy a meager tip, so the story goes, to lead him across the raging Urubamba River and over the steep slopes of the lower Andes to the ruins hidden away in the jungle.

The stonework of Machu Picchu is absolutely amazing—thousands upon thousands of stones, some weighing in excess of 50 tons. These were set in place by the Incan builders without the use of any modern equipment, even wheels. The stones were so carefully chiseled, some of them, especially in the holiest places, for Machu Picchu was a city of worship. The use of mortar was not necessary. They fit together so close you couldn’t slide a blade between them.

Historians say the Spanish never made it this far into the mountains when they came to conquer the Incas in the middle of the 16th Century. And that’s a good thing, probably, because if they had, they likely would have destroyed Machu Picchu as they destroyed so many other Incan sites around the country. They would have knocked over those ancient stones and crushed those mountain temples in the same way they’d crushed the Incan people themselves. They had superior weapons, after all. Had they made it in that far, the Spanish probably would have built a church right there on top of Machu Picchu.

I thought about all this as I walked among the ruins of the city. It was Pentecost Sunday when we finally made it there, so I knew the congregation was at that very moment listening to the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Church, how it blew in like a wind upon the first disciples and gave them that amazing ability to speak to one another across their great divides of language and culture and history. I thought about this as I watched a Peruvian woman, a tour guide with that distinctive Andean look (and who knows, she might have been a direct descendant of the ones who first built Machu Picchu). I watched her speak *German* to a group of tourists.

Amazing!

Yes, but not only amazing. I felt something else as well. Something hard to describe. I felt, well, small. I can't say why exactly, but I think it had something to do not only with the beauty and vastness of that city but also the weight of the history behind it. I felt that in a very personal way.

Here I was, not a Spaniard, granted, but a person of European descent, an *American Christian*, from a place where we have our own long history of displacing and disrupting native peoples. It felt strange to me to be there, knowing how privileged I am in my own life, knowing that the relative comfort that I live in is the result not only of the hard work and determination of my ancestors – that's true, to an extent, but it is the result also of my ancestors' stealing things from other people. Stealing labor, stealing rights, stealing the land itself.

It probably didn't help this feeling that for the past few days I'd been waited on, hand and foot, by native Peruvian porters and cooks and guides, each one with that distinctive indigenous look. I thought about the injustice of it all as I watched them speed past me on the mountain trail, to go ahead and set up camp for me, carrying on their backs everything I could possibly need to be comfortable, three times the weight I had on my back, and doing it all in worn out sandals, some of them.

How'd it get to be this way? I wondered. And what does it all mean for me, for us, for the church, and for the world? I suppose that's why this one line from the scripture catches my eye: "We are debtors," Paul says. We are debtors. What does he mean by that, do you think?

He wrote it to the church in Rome, we know, perhaps to address some specific things going on with the people there, but also to lay out a kind of comprehensive explanation of how the gospel of Jesus Christ relates to traditional Jewish ideas like sin and judgment, righteousness and the Law.

What Paul wrote was for that time and place, first and foremost, but it also seems like the kind of thing God would intend for all of us to hear, in every time and place. We are debtors, people. We owe something to someone else, you and me. We're in arrears, in hock, on the tab. It's like the scripture that says, "Here's a land on which you have not labored, cities you have not built, vineyards and olive yards you did not plant. All this is here for you, but it's been bought and paid for by another. We are debtors."

He means that in a spiritual sense, of course. But I believe that every spiritual truth is borne out in time and history. That's what makes truths true. So yes, we owe God our very existence. Yes, it was God who first breathed life into our bodies and Spirit into our lives. Yes, but our indebtedness is *tangible* too. It involves real people and places and histories. We really are living a good life, most of us, that isn't ours by rights. We really are debtors.

But the question is: What do we do with our indebtedness? With the spiritual *and* the historical sense of it. What does it mean for us, this knowledge that we owe so much for our lives? It seems to me there may be helpful and unhelpful ways of dealing with our indebtedness. I couldn't help but think of that in relation to one of our recent skirmishes in the never-ending culture wars. Recall how the National Football League decided to deal with players who wanted to use their position and power to protest certain things, to draw attention to the racial and social injustices that still plague this great country. Do you remember what the NFL owners decided?

They said to the players, “No, you may not do this. If you don’t stand for the national anthem, you’ll be fined by the league.”

Now, I understand that this is a complex and convoluted issue, multilayered and deeply emotional for so many Americans, a thing about which people of good conscience might disagree. But still, it seems to me the whole thing might be called a dreadful case of misunderstanding, specifically of misunderstanding our indebtedness.

What I mean is, where in the world did we get the idea that patriotism and protest are mutually exclusive? Given the history of our country, it seems a funny thing to believe, doesn’t it? We were born protestors, as a nation, from the time we began throwing English tea into Boston Harbor long ago. And as yet another Memorial Day passes, with our nation still engaged in military conflict around the globe, one wonders whether there is any better tribute to those who have died in military service than to keep on striving for the high ideals upon which the country was built.

We owe them so much, don’t we? The servicemen and servicewomen. We are profoundly in their debt. And yet, if we think we honor them, or somehow repay that debt by silencing our fellow citizens, we are sorely mistaken, don’t you think? We have misunderstood the very nature of our indebtedness and what it asks of us, on a spiritual as much as a political level. One way to think of it is to ask this question: Would we have our brothers and sisters, our sons and daughters, dying for freedoms we don’t even bother to use? No. This is a misunderstanding of indebtedness and what it means for us. And it’s not unlike the original one, in many ways. Paul, it seems, was trying to hammer home this one point, again and again and again, for the people of God: you cannot repay your debt to God through slavish obedience or mindless observance of tradition. At best you will just spin your wheels in trying. At worst you will do great harm to others.

It’s impossible to pay your debt for several reasons. First off, you’re not that righteous, as it turns out! No one is righteous, as Paul says elsewhere, no, not one. But more to the point, your debt is not owed *to tradition*. Nor is it owed to history or custom or culture, or any of those things we spend so much time honoring. Your debt is to *God*, people. That is who you owe! And God is not contained somewhere in a box or even a book. God is not tucked away safely in the annals of history. No, God is alive—God is *alive* in the world today!

I hope you will hear this as the profoundly good news it is. We are not debtors *to the flesh*, to use Paul’s term, but we are debtors to God’s own Spirit! God’s own Spirit, which was poured out upon the church, the whole church, in all its beautiful and terrible diversity, at Pentecost. All the sinners, from all the various times and places, are bound together as one, by the very breath of God.

And it is this same breath, this same Spirit, the scripture says, that cries out from within our lungs, as we realize who we are, *whose* we are. We belong to God. That is the proclamation of baptism, is it not? We are God’s children. We are permitted to call on God as we would a Father or a Mother, without hesitation, without judgment, and without fear. And what can that mean, then, for our indebtedness to God, except that it can never be repaid, ever? Who can repay a parent, after all? None of us could ever do that.

So instead God pushes us away from the obsession with repayment and toward the gift of freedom, real freedom, the freedom of a child who is not perfect but per-

fectly loved. That's real freedom, isn't it? Freedom from the debt, yes, but freedom to act in the world as well. Freedom to speak, freedom to live, freedom to love one another and to give to one another as freely as we have received. That's real gospel freedom.

See, when the spirit of fear in us is gone, there is no more reason to hurt and harass one another. Why bother stealing things when you're already heir to the riches of the kingdom? Why bother silencing others or excluding others, when you already have your own place at the table, confirmed, guaranteed, bought and paid for completely. Do you believe that? I hope you do. You have a place close to the heart of God. Now, as I've said, I hope this sounds like good news to you, like real and meaningful freedom in a world too often defined by various forms of slavery. We are given something better in our baptism, people of God. God gives us God's own Spirit so that we might live a life unencumbered by guilt and untainted by fear.

What can this mean for you specifically? I couldn't say. I don't know what shape this freedom might take for you in your life, how you might be called to live out your own deep gratitude to God. I don't know. But ask God to show you, and I believe God will. I do know that for us, as a church, it means everything, this good news. It informs every ministry we undertake, every moment of worship, every mission. We want to share with the world the goodness and freedom of God's great love in Jesus Christ.

And we'll keep on doing that until God finally builds for us and for the world that other city, the one mentioned in the closing pages of the scriptures, where mourning and crying and pain are gone, and the city comes down from the heavens like a bride, adorned. And the city has no temple, the scripture says, for its temple is the Lord God and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God is its light. And all the nations will walk by that light. And the gates of that city, the scripture says, will never be shut.