

Texts: Jeremiah 31.31-34
Psalm 51.1-12
Hebrews 5.5-10
John 12.20-33

Did you know that since 1989 the overall credit card debt for Americans grew by 315%? You can see why over 1 million people filed for bankruptcy last year. Now we know that it isn't just individuals but entire corporations who have gotten themselves into the same kind of financial peril. When you're in that far over your head even bankruptcy can seem like a dream come true because it is a chance to start all over with a clean slate. Given our national familiarity (dare I say national obsession) with debt, you can see the appeal of using the image of financial debt as a way to think about forgiveness. And there is some biblical language that supports that understanding of how the human condition is handled by a merciful God: we owe God a debt we cannot pay and in God's mercy that debt is forgiven.

Here's the limitation in that metaphor: alarming number of people are filing for bankruptcy for the second and third time in their life. As we've seen in companies who have received federal bail outs: these so called new starts and clean slates do not always translate into renewed fiscal responsibility. Nothing really changes once the debt is forgiven. It simply becomes an opportunity to do it all over again.

We've been looking at the theme of covenant through the season of Lent. One of the recurring themes as you look at this relationship throughout the Old Testament between God and humankind is precisely this dynamic. When we reduce our relationship with God to a business transaction – to a ledger that balances our faithfulness against our unfaithfulness - we end up in just the same situation that Jeremiah laments. We are unable to hold up our end of the bargain. Every opportunity for forgiveness, over time, becomes an opportunity to fall once again. If you change the metaphor from the realm of finance to the justice system the same problem remains. To think of God's mercy and forgiveness in terms of clemency or in terms of expunging your record presents just the same problem. Think about how often criminals who even serve their time find themselves back in prison again.

If all we read from Jeremiah's prophecy is the last phrase from the last verse from today, "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more¹," then we are left with a false impression of what is really happening in God's work of redemption in the world. Is the problem really about our record – the great ledger in the sky? Is everything really ok if our past could just be wiped clean? The answer is no. This prophecy speaks of day when the unending cycle of sin and forgiveness will end. That is what we need to hear as this season of Lent - this consideration of God's covenant renewed - comes to a close. We need to be clear about is at the heart of this covenant – what is true forgiveness – we need to understand what it takes to be right with God in the world.

"The days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah."² It will not be like the old covenant – the one you could not keep – for this covenant I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts and they will be my

¹ Jeremiah 31.34

² Jeremiah 31.31

people. No one is going to have to remind each other to know God because every single one of you will know me and I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.³ If you want to continue in the justice system metaphor, what God is after is rehabilitation not punishment.

God wants to be known and that is so different from being obeyed. Think about the most intimate relationship you have. It could be with a partner or spouse, a friend, a parent, a child. Think about that relationship for a moment. If that person was doing something that was destructive and hurtful and you asked them to stop, it isn't enough for them to stop doing it in your presence. What you really want is for them to understand why it bothers you so much. You want them to understand what you value and what is important to you and you want them to share those same values. You want them to stop not to **appease you** or **obey you** or because they are **afraid of you** but because they have come to love you so deeply and know you so intimately that they now see the world the same way that you do.

That's what God is after with this covenant – for the law of God (the ways of God) to be written on our hearts. That's what the work of redemption has always been about – from the very beginning – for us to **know** God and **love** God. And for the things that matter most to God to become the things that matter most to us.

The problem isn't a debt we owe or punishment we deserve. The problem is that we do not know God deeply enough. Or perhaps another way of saying it is that we haven't always been able to discern just how deeply our lives are caught up in the ways of the world and how different the ways of the world are from the ways of God. Psalm 51 captures this awareness in verse 6: "You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart." That's a more helpful way to talk about the work of redemption in the world: coming to understand and embody the wisdom of God.

I've always been troubled by some of the more traditional ways the church has talked about God's work of redemption in the world – particularly the place of the cross in that work. Here are three ways the church has talked about it in the past.

- If our problem is that we owe a debt to God then what Jesus does on the cross is pay that debt.
- If our problem is that we need to be punished for our sins then what Jesus does is take that punishment for us.
- If a sacrifice is required for atonement then Jesus becomes that sacrifice.

All of these atonement theories (as they are called) have long troubled me because they paint a picture of a God whose wrath must be appeased before forgiveness can be granted. It just doesn't line up with the God revealed in both the Old and Testaments – a God whose steadfast love and mercy endure forever. Each of these theories takes as their starting point the logic and principles of the world. The metaphors borrow from human systems: financial systems, judicial systems, religious systems. If I read the gospels correctly, what Jesus was doing from the moment of his incarnation up until and including his death on the cross is to embody the wisdom and ways of God which stand in stark contrast to the systems of this world. (We're going to look at this more closely with the texts next week on Palm Sunday.)

Having said that, it is also true that Jesus' death remains central to understanding the wisdom and ways of God. In John's gospel today, Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."⁴

³ My paraphrase of Jeremiah 31.33-34

⁴ John 12.24

Jesus' death isn't about a transaction with God on our behalf to secure our forgiveness. His death comes about as he refuses to surrender to the systems and powers of the world. He isn't afraid of death. And in fact the powerful witness of his life – including his willingness to stay the course when others call out for his death - draws all people to him.⁵ “The salvific power of Jesus' death resides in the community that is gathered as a result of it.”⁶ I no longer remember where I read this observation but it was so helpful to me that I share it with you here.

The fruit of Jesus' death is found everywhere the community of faith continues to take up the ways and wisdom of God that Jesus embodied. It's as we set aside self-interest, forgive our enemies, it's in our care for the poor and our commitment to justice. The fruit of Jesus' death lives in us whenever we refuse to let fear overcome the impulse to love.

This is why we come here. We come to hear God's Word proclaimed and to be fed by Christ at his table. We come so that our understanding of God's ways and wisdom will become so deeply engrained in who we are and how we live it will be as if God's law is written on our hearts.⁷
Amen.

⁵ As John makes clear in John 12.32.

⁶ I place this in quotes because I read this sentence in an article years ago and copied it down. I, have, however, lost the source of this quote.

⁷ Jeremiah 31.33.