

Sermon

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Sin or Debt?

Pastor Dan Peterson

The link was irresistible.

Last Sunday, I compared what Jesus said in our reading from Luke's Gospel with the outlook of Dr. Martin Luther King, whose life the nation had recently commemorated. Both men, I suggested, shared two things in common: they mixed politics with religion, and they paid for it with their lives.

According to Luke 4:18-19, part of our Gospel reading from last week, Jesus begins his public ministry by reading some of the most politically charged words from Scripture to his fellow Israelites in the synagogue. These words, which Jesus applies to himself, refer to the one who will free the captives and liberate the oppressed. Surely, his listeners must have assumed he was referring to Rome. Who else but Caesar would have been responsible for their oppression by forcing them to pay exorbitantly high taxes and thus condemning them to lives of poverty and servitude?

By the end of the narrative, however, Luke has apparently taken a different path. Instead of blaming Rome for the death of Jesus, he blames the religious authorities of the Jewish people. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, declares his innocence, as does the Roman centurion at the foot of the cross. The real animosity ostensibly exists between Jesus and his fellow Israelites, one we can trace from Jesus' death all the way back to Luke 4, our Gospel reading for today. There they chase him out of the synagogue after he says that, like the prophets of old, his own people will reject him.

Ultimately, it turns out, Luke ends up countering the religious and political leaders of the day. He casts Pilate as a weak administrator who bows to his subjects. He has Jesus speak out against unjust wealth as well as call for its redistribution in the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our sins," he says, "as we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us" (Luke 11:4).

How could such language be anything but political?

Poor Matthew

In the process of unearthing the political Jesus of Luke's Gospel, I became increasingly critical of Matthew, the evangelist who "spiritualizes" the political Jesus. Let me explain what I mean. When Luke's Jesus blesses the poor and the hungry, telling them they will be filled as a consequence of God's emerging

upside-down kingdom (6:20-21), Matthew's Jesus blesses those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (5:6). Externally, nothing will change. The poor will remain poor.

Jesus, in other words, did not come to liberate the oppressed or change the conditions that gave rise to poverty. He came to save souls.

Years ago, former President George W. Bush suggested the same thing while hosting a prayer breakfast at the White House that included among its guests Bono, the lead singer of the rock band U-2. Bono, a Christian, gave a speech where he challenged Bush to forgive the loans impoverished countries across the world owed to the United States. What a gift that would be, Bono concluded. Think of what these nations could do for their own people if they were freed from their economic indebtedness to us!

Without batting an eye, President Bush replied that in America, "we give with our hearts."

Nothing changes when we spiritualize poverty or generosity. The powerful keep their positions of power, the greedy retain their wealth, and the needy continue to go to bed hungry. Luke's Jesus reminds us that inequality, exploitation, and economic injustice run counter to God's will.

The gospel, in other words, has political implications.

That said, something about my treatment of Matthew last week did not sit well with me. After all, I had assumed that while Luke uses the language of "debt" in the Lord's Prayer, Matthew must (I thought) use the word "sin." Where else would we have gotten the language we use in our worship service?

And so I turned to Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer, which most scholars consider to be an elaboration of the shorter version we find in Luke, where Jesus says we should ask God to "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (6:12).

I was wrong.

Here in the Lord's Prayer at least, Matthew ostensibly refrains from spiritualizing Jesus' teachings. Granted, Jesus also teaches that we should also forgive others when they sin. At the same time, Jesus tells us we should "put our money where our mouth is" by forgiving those who cannot pay us back as well. In the process, we reconcile ourselves to one another both spiritually *and* economically.

Solving the Riddle

I had just about closed the book on the subject when I looked again at Matthew. How, I wondered, could God forgive us literally of our debts? Obviously, none of us owes any money to God. Then my eyes scrolled down to the footnotes and there it was, the answer: “debts, a metaphor for sins (see 18:23-35)” (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd ed., p. 16).

Suddenly, everything came crashing down around me. If debt was simply a metaphor for sin, then the gospel meant nothing when it came to addressing economic injustice and the plight of the poor. That is not what I want to hear. I want a gospel that makes a difference in the world, not simply one that speaks to my soul (although, I want that too).

Tormented, I turned without delay to Matthew 18:23-35. It was “The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.” Jesus uses the word “debt” there too. He concludes, however, by stating the meaning of the parable in plain terms. You should “forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart,” he says (v. 35). I was crushed. Everything I had just preached about the Lord’s Prayer was wrong.

Or was it?

In the days that followed, I could not resist the urge to explore the matter further. I am glad I did. For one thing, I learned Jesus in Matthew is not totally unconcerned with the plight of the poor. As PHEME PERKINS points out in the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, “In the Roman period, high taxes and the [unpredictable variation in crop yields] combined to drive the bulk of the peasant population into extreme debt” (p. 190). Jesus was sensitive to that; in Matthew, for instance, “he tells his disciples they must not refuse any who want to borrow from them” (5:42).

What about those who cannot repay their loans? Matthew seems a little less forgiving, if you will. What about Luke? He uses the same Greek word for “debt” that we find in Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer. Did he also use it as a metaphor for sins, or was Jesus advising his listeners to “set free” those who could not pay back their loans so that they too could regain their well-being and feed their children?

I must say, I could not find an obvious answer. We know that Matthew’s Jesus tells us to ask God to forgive us our debts, which is obviously a metaphor for sin and which suggests that “debts” in relation to others must likewise be a metaphor for sin. Luke’s Jesus, on the other hand, makes it clear that we should ask God to “forgive us our sins,” but then says we should “forgive everyone indebted to us” (11:4).

Could it be, then, that by avoiding the use of metaphorical language altogether, Luke's Jesus invites us to take him at his word? The translation certainly supports it: God forgives sin, and we forgive those indebted to us, namely, those who cannot pay us back due to hardship or scarcity. That, after all, was the context in which Jesus lived. Giving or forgiving exclusively "from the heart" would have done nothing to "fill the hungry with good things," as Mary sings in chapter one (Luke 1:53). The Kingdom of God would – as a consequence – have meant nothing.

The Annual Meeting

I had several directions I wanted to take in today's sermon. Paul's affirmation in our second reading that "love never ends," even when our talents and abilities fade, even when we descend into cognitive or physical decline, is so assuring. Any Christian who doubts (as I do) the prospect of seeing relatives or loved ones after they die should cling to it.

Why, then, focus once again on the "political" Jesus? The answer is simple: all of us presumably want to belong to a church where making a difference in the "real world" matters. In many ways, our annual meeting is a celebration of that. Not only do we learn of the various ministries internal to the congregation and what they accomplished. We also learn about and affirm the ministries that have once again changed the lives of people in the local and international communities we serve.

If we only gave with our hearts, none of what we do would matter. Our mission would be empty. That, to me, illustrates why the language Jesus uses is so important. He did not come merely to save our souls or change our hearts. He came to change the world, to make it a better place, especially for those in need.

Last Sunday, I compared what Jesus said in our reading from Luke's Gospel with the outlook of Dr. Martin Luther King. I see the difference he made on a grand scale. At the same time, I see the difference you make, too, and I thank God for it.

The world is a better place because of you and what you do for this ministry.

Amen.