

SUUC Worship – Feb. 23, 2014

Reading

A saying ascribed to Jesus in Matthew 18:23-34:

- Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. (These servants are his high officials.) When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents (equiv to over \$100 million today, a big amount); and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, “Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.
- But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants, who owed him a hundred denarii (equiv of \$200 today), and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and besought him ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt.
- When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger, his lord delivered him to the jailers (Greek *torturers*), till he should pay all his debt.

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What's Forgiven? Who's Forgiven? – Intro.

- This month's sermon theme is "forgiveness." I'm a bit of a trouble-maker. So I want to talk today about what's forgiven – & who's forgiven. Now, we all know what's forgiven -- even if in UU churches we don't talk much about it. Calvin Coolidge, our 30th President, was also a man who didn't talk much. At a reception one Sunday, a lady found that Coolidge had attended church that morning. She asked him what had been the subject of the sermon. "Sin," replied Coolidge. After a silent interval, she asked, "What did the preacher have to say about sin?" "He was against it," said Coolidge. This afternoon, you can also say that today's sermon was about SIN. But the speaker was NOT AGAINST it, but FOR it – or at least for exploring the IDEA.
- The reason that Unitarian Universalists don't often talk about SIN is because SIN – especially ORIGINAL SIN – and PUNISHMENT for sin, and ATONEMENT for sin are doctrines that we reject and avoid. But no matter how positive our view of human nature, we all know that we are fallible. We all sometimes fall short or commit acts that we ourselves judge as wrong. And we know there are real consequences of our mistakes. Regrets, even guilt or remorse, are felt in every life.
- When we think about this aspect of human life, the symbols or metaphors given us by our culture profoundly shape how we think -- and feel. They are not just rhetorical embellishments to thought. They are what we use to think with. Today, I'm going to look at 3 resonant metaphors of sin and salvation in our Judeo-Xn background:
 - Sin as a defiling stain
 - Sin as a heavy burden
 - Sin as a debt

Defilement as Defect, Opposite of Holiness

- Defilement, in the early Israelite religion, was caused more by circumstantial evil than moral evil -- something a person incurred inadvertently or without full intention – touching a corpse, childbirth, menses – or something that happened to one -- such as a skin disease, lameness, or paralysis. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the texts from the end of Ex, all of Lev, the first part of Nbrs, & much of Deut (your fav.s?) give the rules of purity and impurity– in worship, sexuality, eating, sickness, violent spilling of blood.
- **Is there a system to all these rules (613)?** A clue is God’s holiness, which humans must re-create in themselves. More than moral goodness, the Holy embraces ideas of separateness, wholeness, completeness. Lev.21:17-20 on qualifying priests: “Say to Aaron, None of your descendants thruout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has an injured foot or an injured hand,...” More, but You get the drift. And, over and over it’s repeated sacrificial animals must be “without blemish.”
- Behind the dietary rules there’s a similar idea that food animals should be perfect, complete instances of three types – those that move on land, through the water, and through the air. For herding people like the ancient Israelites, cattle, sheep and goats were the normal land food animals. All 3 have cloven hooves and chew the cud. These ‘normal’ animals are clean. Pigs (cloven hooves, but do not chew the cud) or camels (chew the cud, but hooves are not cloven) are sort of defective, half-breed animals, and so unclean. Similar distinctions hold for birds of the air vs. birds that don’t fly and flying animals that aren’t birds -- and for fish vs. other aquatic animals

The Experience of Defilement; Purification by Washing & Sacrifice

- So defilement arises in contrast to Holiness, by breaching the boundary between the body & the outside, or the boundary of a 'natural' category or class. Uncleanness results from bodily leaking or spilling, from mixing and confusion, from being defective as judged against an ideal. The unclean person feels unworthy, defective, incomplete, dirty.
- To become presentable before the Lord, there are two ritual means of purification:
 - Ritual bathing
 - Animal sacrifice, with a lot of emphasis on sprinkling blood
- For 1 out of 100s of example texts, see the instructions for the Day of Atonement (Lv.16).
 - First are instructions that Aaron the high priest should divest himself of his clothing, ritually bathe his body in water, and then put on holy linen clothing, (Lev. 16:1-4).
 - Second are instructions for sacrificing first a ram as a burnt offering to the Lord, then a bullock to purify the priest and his family, and finally of two goats one chosen by lot for the sin offering for all Israel. (More about the 2nd goat later.)
- Some later Hebrew texts extend ritual bathing beyond ritual impurities to moral sins. But the decisive extension of symbolic bathing to moral sins occurs with John the Baptist "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Matt.3.1-6,Mark 1:4-5). Of course, baptism becomes a central sacrament of Xty.
- Animal sacrifice was an even more influential form of ritual purification. It was central to the ancient Jewish cult -- for thanksgiving, fulfilling a vow, purification – & sometimes for forgiveness of sins. It always has an implication of substitutionary punishment. This symbolism is also central to Xty -- the death of X being the sacrifice that purifies all Xns.

Modern Secular Echoes of Symbolism of Defilement and Purification

Do we see similar ideas of defilement and purification – in our own modern secular and scientific lives today? (Setting aside for now whether we approve of them or not.)

- What about fear of food contamination not just by pathogens, but by unnatural or “bad” ingredients, or by moral impurity. I’m thinking here of all kinds of non-medical diets --whether for motives of morality, unnaturalness, health, or physical appearance.
- A big purity issue in our household: What to do with recyclables contaminated by food traces? The rule is worthy of its own passage in Leviticus: Let’s see – Never put used paper and tin foil in the garbage, they go in the recycling – unless soiled by food, in which case, food-soiled paper goes in the compostable kitchen and yard waste, but food-soiled tin foil does go in the garbage after all.
- Can we think of any modern situations where we symbolically wash away or shed contact with something harmful, immoral or unclean? Maybe the divestment of fossil fuel producers for its moral symbolism, the economic effect being negligible.
- What about purification through substitutionary blood sacrifice? How about upholding the death penalty even in the face of an uncomfortable number of cases where it’s been discovered that the persons sentenced to death were innocent. Or how about keeping us pure and true to our Constitution and its Second Amendment by the blood sacrifice of innocent children?

Biblical (Mainly OT) Idea of Sin as a Heavy Burden

- Let's go on to the second symbol of sin. Bearing a heavy weight or burden is actually the main metaphorical verb used with the OT noun for serious sin. Most people are surprised at this. The cause is a translation difficulty. The Hebrew phrase commonly translated by "forgiveness of sins" would be better rendered as "bearing away the burden of sins."
- There are a few OT texts where the burden idea surfaces even in translation. E.g., Ps 38:4 in the RVS, "...my iniquities have gone over my head; they weigh like a burden too heavy for me." Or Is. 1:4, "Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity,..."
- But most striking is back in the ritual for the Day of Atonement (again in Lev. Ch.16). After Aaron the high priest divests himself, takes a ritual bath, puts on linen clothing, sacrifices a ram as a burnt offering and a bullock to purify himself, then two goats are presented. He chooses one by lot for slaughter as a sin offering. When done with that sacrifice, "Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel and all their transgressions, all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat, and send him away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him to a solitary land; and he shall let the goat go in the wilderness." This is the famous scapegoat, which escapes sacrifice so that it can bear the sins of Israel away into the wilderness.
- In the NT, the best known passage using burden symbolism is the saying of Jesus in Matt. 11:28-30, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Interestingly, this passages does not itself explicitly link the burdens with sin, but subsequent references to this passage in Xn piety do make that connection – e.g. in the 1855 hymn, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

Sins as Burdens, Forgiveness as Bearing Them Away in Modern Secular Society

- What about modern cases of putting the burden of sin on an innocent to bear away?
 - I suggest the deportation of undocumented immigrants, who not only bear our manual labor burdens, but are made symbolically to bear away the burden of our economic woes across our borders.
 - And what about economic austerity policies that make a whole country's economy (but dis-proportionately the poor and less powerful) bear the burden for the sins – even the crimes -- of a few bankster executives.

Debt and Debt Forgiveness in Ancient NE

- Before expanding on the third symbol of sin as economic DEBT, let's talk about debt as debt. Debt has been around a long time, as explained in a new book titled, Debt: The First 5000 Years. We have actual debt records on clay tablets from the Sumerians. And from the beginning, snowballing debt unmitigated by restraint or relief mechanisms caused huge problems for debtors unable to repay:
 - Increasing economic and social inequality and extreme debtor poverty.
 - Debtors' loss of land & homes.
 - Debt servitude or slavery.
 - Debtors' prisons.
- These issues have risen frequently throughout history & are still with us today in some forms. It's been claimed that the main form of unrest & agitation within societies throughout history has been the demand for debt forgiveness.
- Ancient Israel addressed this need for debt relief with the Year of Jubilee. The Jubilee year is a sort of financial reboot that occurs either every 7 years (Deut.) or every 50 years (Leviticus). In the Jubilee year:
 - All debts are forgiven or cancelled
 - All original owners return to land they lost to debt.
 - All debt slaves go free

Sin as Debt from Aramaic in 2nd Temple period: late Hebrew & intertestamental scriptures, rabbinic literature, to NT & early Xty

- Historically, sin symbol of DEBT displaces the metaphor of burden in the 2nd Temple period, after the Jews in Babylonian exile were freed by the Persians to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. The debt symbolism for sin comes in from Aramaic, which, as the Persian empire's official language, became the 2nd day-to-day language of Jews. In Aramaic, the same word (hob) means sin & debt. Under the influence of Aramaic, all Hebrew writings from 540 BC to 70 AD use debt & debt cancellation symbolism for sin & forgiveness.
- NT Greek was also shaped by the Aramaic construal of sin as debt. The NT is permeated with economic metaphors. You all can probably think of some – e.g., in the sayings and parables ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels. Most famous is the Lord's Prayer, which in Matthew's version (ch. 6) says, "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." The basic idea is found in other NT texts and is explicated by in our reading today, the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Matt. 18.
- After X, the Xn message could be summarized: Sins are debts to God, our debt is too great to pay off by our own punishment, X's suffering and death is for the remission of our sins – paying off our debt, purchasing our bond – & so freeing us."

Modern Instance of Debt Forgiveness - Bankruptcy

- So, what about modern instances of sin as debt and forgiveness as debt redemption?
- There may be things that we wouldn't accept today about the traditional Xn symbolism of redemption – the ideas that sin debt is owed to God rather than our fellow creatures who've been wronged, that the debt can only be paid off by punishment, & that X's suffering & death made that payoff of punishment for us.
- But sin debt does have some symbolic advantages. Debt, like stain and burden, points to the effect of sin on the sinner, but it also says that there's another party wronged, to whom something is owed. (BTW, our word "Ought" -- as in what we morally "ought" to do -- is just the past tense of "owe" in Old English.) Debt also sheds light upon who's forgiven --in ways that stain & burden don't; morally you're forgiven if you forgive others.
- But mostly what strikes me is that the modern relevance of the idea of sin as debt is not even metaphorical. I'm pointing to the way our modern society deals with debt forgiveness -- as governed by our Bankruptcy laws. Bankruptcy law is designed to cancel the debts of overburdened debtors and to give them a fresh start. Every modern economy has a form of bankruptcy law, standing in a long tradition of civilization going back at least as far as the Jubilee year of Leviticus.
- Now bankruptcy laws can be either more debtor or creditor friendly, making it easier or hard for a debtor to discharge debts. And they discriminate between different kinds of debtors, making it easier for some to shed debt than for others. And these laws differentiate between kinds of creditors, ensuring some are paid before others.

Making Debt Forgiveness Harder for Consumers

- In 2005, just as subprime mortgages were starting to boom, Congress passed a new bankruptcy law, still mostly in effect -- the “Bankruptcy Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act.” That law has far more severe provisions against alleged individual bankruptcy “abuse” than for consumer protection. In lobbying for the act, the financial industry explicitly argued that consumers should be held responsible for living beyond their means -- and that barriers and restrictions were needed to prevent individuals from abusively getting out of their debts through bankruptcy.
- In the new bankruptcy law, credit card companies & banks got some unforgiving personal income and “means test” requirements -- to eliminate or severely limit chapter 7 “fresh start” bankruptcy for individuals. The burden of proof for consumer bankruptcy was also tilted against debtors, with a large presumption of “bankruptcy abuse.” And bureaucratic obstacles were also enacted for personal bankruptcy.
- The new law also introduced a system that amounted to “partial indentured servitude.” An individual with, say, debts equal to 100% of his income could be forced to hand over to the bank 25% of his gross, pre-tax income for the rest of his life. This is because the bank could add onto what a person owed, interest, fees, and penalties equivalent to 30 % interest each year. In the end, a mortgage holder or a consumer credit debt holder would owe far more than the bank loaned him. The debtor would end up working, in effect, one quarter time for the bank.
- Studies have shown that actual major causes of individual debt default are not abuse or fraud as claimed, but inflated housing debt and medical bills. Student loans, especially from for-profit schools offering questionable educational value, are another more recent and rising concern.

Different Bankruptcy Laws for Business & For People

The problem is not just that the new bankruptcy law is draconian for consumer debtors. Together with other laws, the new bankruptcy law designed in a huge difference between individual consumer bankruptcy and business (especially corporate) bankruptcy.

- The new 2005 bankruptcy law draws an important distinction between consumer debt and business debt. Bankruptcy liquidation of consumer debt is far more difficult and much more limited than liquidation of business debt. Working families trying to get out from under debts get treated worse than businesses under the bankruptcy laws. “Individuals responsible for the corporations (executives) are largely protected from any of the costs of failures, whereas an individual who gets into debt, they’re presumed to pay most of the cost back,” says Theresa Ghilarducci, chair of the Econ. Dept. at The New School of Social Research . “The bankruptcy laws presume that the individual was stupid or immoral both in getting into debt and in trying to get out of it via bankruptcy. But business enterprises are presumed to get into bankruptcy situations through no fault of their own.”
- Big businesses actually count on using the bankruptcy system to shift their own debts onto blameless parties. Bankruptcy is just standard business practice for some. “Corporations often use bankruptcy as contingency strategies in their business model,” she said. “It is the people who didn’t have any role in the corporation bankruptcies who actually pay the price – ordinary employees, pensioners, vendors, customers, taxpayers – but not the executive officers who are responsible.”
- To top this off, the privileged treatment of business debt even – or especially -- applies to the banks and hedge funds and traders who caused the financial crisis of 2008 – and who were foreclosing on mortgages and taking consumers to collections.

How We Got the New Bankruptcy Law

- Ghilarducci noted that the laws were written at the behest of the financial industries, fully aware of what they were doing, in a political and legislative climate where wealthy individuals and firms have much more power than ordinary people. In the deliberations over the new bankruptcy law from 1997 to 2005, the opposition consisted of a wide variety of groups, including non-profit corporations, consumer advocates, legal scholars, retired bankruptcy judges, and the editorial pages of many national and regional newspapers. On the other side were credit card companies, banks, collection agencies and an estimated \$100M spent on lobbying.

Public News Service article "Bankruptcy Bias: Law 'Written To Favor' Corporations (actually businesses) Over Folks" Nov. 12, 2013 (www.publicnewsservice.org/2013-11-12/social-justice/bankruptcy-bias-law-written-to-favor-corporations-over-folks?)

Conclusion

There've been a couple surprises for me as I've worked on this sermon – and maybe for you as you've listened.

- One is that I could get so interested in the biblical book of Leviticus.
- The other, more serious, surprise is how our new bankruptcy laws could not only catch my interest, but get me so worked up and indignant. It's not just that the law is so obstructive and so crushing for ordinary people struggling with debt. It's also that the legislative process and arguments made the motives of the financial industry so clear. These guardians of financial rectitude were explicitly saying, "These little people we have in collections just don't know how to live within their means (not mentioned that the means might be minimum wage jobs and unemployment benefits). So they just live a profligate life and run up debts. And then they get out of their debts by declaring bankruptcy. We want bankruptcy 'reformed' so we can continue to grab them by the throat and say 'Pay up, you deadbeat.'"
- Then in 2008 in a financial crisis largely caused by the financial industry, they sang a different song when the debts were theirs. Billions of dollars in government bailout loans and lowered interest went to these same financial industry businesses.
- I ask you to reflect on these things. But I can hardly think of a case in our time that more clearly and strongly illustrates the moral relevance of what Jesus meant when he taught us to pray: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."
- *Silent Meditation (2 minutes)*

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Sermon – Suggested Reading

For any who are interested in some fascinating books that stimulated and shaped the ideas in this sermon, a list follows:

Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger.

Gary Anderson, Sin: A History.

Paula Fredriksen, Sin: The Early History of an Idea.

David Graeber, Debt: The First 5,000 Years.

Peter Brown, Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 A.D.

Theresa Sullivan, Jay Westbrook, and Elizabeth Warren, As We Forgive Our Debtors: Bankruptcy and Consumer Credit in America.

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