*Based on \*Matthew 18:23b -34. The Parable of the Unjust Emperor*

*\*Incarnational translation below*

*Forgive us our debts*, we pray, in The Way of Jesus, *as we forgive our debtors*.

To my knowledge, Presbyterians are the only ones who pray this version of The Lord’s Prayer. In the United Methodist tradition of my childhood, I learned to pray for forgiveness of my *trespasses*, even though I had no clue at the age of eight what the word trespass actually meant. The ecumenical version prays to be forgiven of *sins*, which is what most of us generally think of when we talk about the need for forgiveness.

But we say *debts*, and for good reason. The Greek is very clear. Jesus is referring to something “owed,” something we are supposed to “pay back,” but cannot. Like the first indentured servant in our Lesson, we are utterly dependent on the grace of God for forgiveness of our debts.

Even we Presbyterians, though, tend to spiritualize this debt forgiveness for which we say we pray. Forgive us the debt of our *transgressions*, most of us think. “Loose the cords of mistakes binding us,” as we prayed earlier today. “Erase the inner marks our failures make.”

And, of course, we do seek forgiveness of our mistakes and our failures, and we do pray for strength to forgive the mistakes and failures of others. But that is not, I have come to believe, what Jesus means when he tells us to pray for – and to enact – debt forgiveness. I think Jesus means what he says. Literally.

It all comes back to the *Shmita*, this Jewish Sabbatical Year we find ourselves exploring these days. A year in which, according to teachings in Exodus and Deuteronomy, the entire people of God must do five things: let the land lie fallow; release indentured servants; forgive debts; release private land holdings to the commons; and freely distribute stored food and perennial harvests.

Let me say that again. Every seven years, according to biblical economics, the people of God are required to, among other things, release indentured servants and forgive debts. Literally.

Surely the thoroughly Jewish Jesus, schooled all his life in the teachings of *Torah*, knows the requirements of the sabbatical year. Surely the thoroughly Jewish community addressed by the author of the Gospel According to Matthew, schooled all their lives in the teachings of *Torah*, knows the requirements of the sabbatical year.

The question is, as we asked in our Teach the Preacher conversation this week, does anybody follow them?

In “The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant,” as our Lesson this morning is titled in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the answer is clearly *no*.

This parable begins with a wealthy emperor, who has more money than God and then some, lending a portion of that wealth to someone who can never pay it back. In my translation, I call the debtor an *indentured servant.* Another way to describe this relationship is *debt slavery*. An individual or a family that has fallen into hard times will pledge their services – or the services of their wives or children – as security for the repayment of their debt. But if the debt is too large to pay back, as in the case of this first indentured servant in the lesson, the debt passes on to the next generation. And the next. And the next.

The biblical tradition ABHORS debt slavery. The prophets rail against it, describing debt slavery as the consequence of a wealthy few monopolizing resources meant for the common good. Remember the lessons of Wilderness School, as we learned them last week: 1. God gives everyone everything they need; 2. Hoarding Stinks! Spread the wealth around; 3. Take a Break! Enjoy the gifts of this life with God and one another so that we never end up with a class of people who never rest and a class of people who live in the lap of luxury.

Debt slavery, according to the prophets, breaks every single one of these lessons from Wilderness School. Debt slavery, according to the prophets, is a direct affront to the God who brings the people *out* of slavery and into a land of promise and plenty. They are never supposed to turn around and impose that consequence on others.

The *Shmita*, the Sabbatical Year, insists on a corrective to debt slavery. Okay, fine, *Torah* teaches, maybe we cannot eliminate debt slavery altogether, but at least we can put limits on it. The longest anyone – or anyone’s wife or child – can ever be held in debt slavery is six years. In the seventh year, the debt must be forgiven, and the indentured servant must be set free.

Perpetual poverty must never exist, according to the teachings of *Torah*.

Which means that while, on the surface, when we hear the Lesson of the wealthy emperor forgiving the enormous debt of the first indentured servant, we lift up the obvious compassion of the emperor and the ingratitude of the “unforgiving” servant, when we apply the teachings of *Shmita* to the parable, I think Jesus is getting at something deeper.

According to the teachings of the Sabbatical Year, forgiveness of debts is a given, not an act of compassion. It is an act of justice, not a feel-good sense of charity. And debt forgiveness in the Sabbatical Year does not stop with simply wiping the slate clean. In the Sabbatical Year, the one who forgives the debt must also offer provision for the formerly indentured servant to get on his – or her – or their – feet. Otherwise, the formerly indentured servant will just end right back in debt slavery again.

No wonder the formerly indentured servant in our Lesson is so desperate for a couple of bucks that he throttles his brother in bondage. He needs the money! He has a family to support.

The problem, I think Jesus is trying to say, is not with the so-called unforgiving servant. The problem, I think Jesus is trying to say, is that we have become so immune to the abomination of perpetual poverty that we who fall through the cracks gang up on one another, while the ones who exploit us congratulate themselves for their generosity!

We must live differently, I think Jesus is trying to say. In *community*. We are bound to one another, whether we want to be or not. Forgive us *our* debts, Jesus says we must pray. Not just forgive *me my* debt. None of this works unless we all get on board.

Which brings us to today. And the mountains of debt you and I have racked up, through credit cards and mortgages and student loans and all the rest. And the mountains of debt our governments have racked up all across the world. And the mountains of debt white supremacy has racked up. And the mountains of debt we have racked up against the land, itself.

The truth is, in biblical terms, in spiritual terms and in planetary terms, every one of us finds ourselves mirrored in the form of that first indentured servant in our Lesson. Including the billionaires battling for dominance of outer space. The truth is, not one of us can ever pay back the fullness of what we really owe, even after we finally get around to reparations and climate justice. Our only hope is some form of literal – as well as spiritual – collective debt forgiveness.

And so we pray, dear God, *forgive us our debts*, prostrate on the ground, with our brother in bondage in our Lesson for today. But we do not stop there. *Help us forgive our debtors*, we pray as well, which is the real point of the Lesson today.

*Shmita*, the Sabbatical Year, the teachings of *Torah* do not work unless we all do our part.

So let’s do our part. Whether it is *releasing the strands we hold of others’ guilt*. Or *forgiving what others hide*. Or *relieving others of their need to repay what they owe us.* Or *scrubbing our hearts of others’ faults*.

Let’s do our part, as we pray for wholeness in The Way of Jesus, with countless others who have prayed this prayer, *forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,* for two millennia.

Let the church say, Amen!

*\*Incarnational Translation of Matthew 18:23b-34*

*Jesus says, “An emperor intends to settle accounts with his indentured servants. As the emperor begins the reckoning, one who owes more money than God is brought forward. Obviously, the indentured servant cannot pay, so the emperor orders him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, in order to settle the account. Hearing this, the indentured servant prostrates himself before the emperor, in complete subjugation, begging forbearance and promising eventual payment. The emperor is so moved with compassion that he releases the indentured servant and forgives the debt altogether.*

*As the formerly indentured servant leaves, he comes upon a brother in bondage, who owes him a couple of bucks. The formerly indentured servant throttles his brother in bondage, demanding payment. The brother in bondage prostrates himself before the former indentured servant, in complete subjugation, begging forbearance and promising eventual payment. But the former indentured servant refuses to negotiate. He casts his brother into prison, insisting on repayment of the debt.*

*This turn of events greatly distresses the rest of the formerly indentured servant’s brothers in bondage. They rush to report everything to the emperor. Then the emperor summons the formerly indentured servant and calls him out for his hypocrisy. The emperor is so angry that he rescinds the earlier debt forgiveness and hands over the re-indentured servant to be tortured, insisting on repayment of the debt.”*

\*”Incarnational translation for preaching seeks to recontextualize biblical texts so that they say and do in new times and places something like what they said and did in ancient times and places” (Cosgrove and Edgerton, **In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching,** 62).