

Proper 18A Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20 September 6, 2020  
St. Dunstan's Church and Church of the Redeemer, Bethesda, Maryland  
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1) *You OWE me!* The phrase has several meanings, does it not?

How many WAYS do we TURN that phrase? Let's NAME some ways we use it:

- *You owe me \$200. That's the bill for services rendered, goods delivered, the balance of the loan—it's due in full—please remit.*  
OWING sometimes requires REIMBURSING.
- *Hey, you owe me one! I did YOU a favor; someday you can do ME one.*  
OWING sometimes requires RECIPROCATING.
- *You owe me NO LESS! Step up! Honor our agreement!*  
OWING sometimes requires REFORMING.

OWING as the responsibility to reimburse, to reciprocate, or to reform—these ways of owing are integral to human relationships.

They can play positive roles in human interactions.

But there are two NOT so healthy ways of being told *YOU OWE ME*.

- *You owe me BIG TIME—I sacrificed a lot for you; you're deeply in my debt.*  
THAT is, in effect, a demand for RANSOM  
a payment to obtain release from emotional captivity.
- *You owe me—and it's PAYBACK TIME—You hurt me bad; I'll hurt you worse.*  
THAT is, in effect, a threat of REVENGE—an eye for an eye, at least.

2) Neatly laid out in a list like that,

it's easy to distinguish the first three kinds of OWING from the last two, isn't it?

In practice, however, the lines sometimes get blurred.

What is—deep down—a demand for RANSOM or a threat of REVENGE can masquerade as though it were just a request for RECIPROCITY or REFORM—a mixed message—driven by the assumption that moral compensation can be calculated like a balance due, or a cash advance to be REIMBURSED.

That makes OWING even more challenging:

- How can we possibly compute how much we owe those who've done us favors? Especially if they think we're deeply in their debt?
- How do we "pay off" those whom WE'VE offended if they're demanding payback?
- When we have been wounded, how do we assess, let alone collect what we reasonably believe we are more than due?

These aren't simple questions.

Yet today, St. Paul puts before us a single simple-sounding answer to them all:

*Owe no one anything, he says, except to love one another.*

How practical is that? How realistic? Is it even possible?

3) Well, one thing for sure, Paul isn't saying, *Don't pay your bills.*

(After all, he's just reminded his hearers to "pay their taxes.")

And he's NOT saying that all we need to dispel moral debts is a burst of warm, fuzzy feeling.

(After all, not long before, as we heard last Sunday, Paul set forth a list of 23 actions that love requires—such as:

- Being patient in suffering. Blessing those who persecute us.
- Not repaying anyone evil for evil. Overcoming evil with good.

"Down to earth" actions, all of these—each one an uphill climb.

Do you see what Paul is doing? He is radically redefining what it means to OWE.

Paul is turning debt's conventional definitions inside out.

Debt, for Paul, is not a brickbat brandished over people's heads.

Debt is not a burden placed on people's backs.

A debt of love is a GIFT people OFFER one another.

A gift already bestowed on us by the God who IS Love, and INCARNATES love in Jesus.

Love—a gift that, freely shared, returns to bless, again and again.

Whatever other kinds of debt we may either acquire or impose—

in love, those burdens are transfigured into bridges of connection.

Debt is not, fundamentally, about reimbursement, reciprocity, or reform.

Debt is most definitely not about ransom or revenge.

Debt—a debt of love—says Paul, is about the obligation to seek RECONCILIATION.

The responsibility of working toward the goal of mending and tending RELATIONSHIPS.

4) In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul says that we, the church,

are ambassadors for Christ, charged with the mission of reconciling the world to God.

If the Community of Ambassadors is itself riven by conflict unresolved, that reconciling message is deeply compromised.

Thus, when relationships get frayed in the Family of Faith, Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel, implores his followers to embark on rigorous, tireless journeys of reconciliation.

Internal conflict was inevitable in Matthew's own community.

It was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles—new believers, all.

Different traditions, different cultures, different ways of worship—

different experiences, different ways of expressing those experiences—

NO WAY members of Matthew's community would avoid stepping on each other's toes, getting on each other's nerves, rubbing each other the wrong way!

So Matthew reaches back into his mental resource library of Jesus teachings.

First, he recounts a Jesus story that Luke also tells: the story of a shepherd who does whatever it takes, who stops at nothing to find one lost sheep, and bring it safely home to the flock in the fold.

Matthew concludes his telling of this story with these words of Jesus:

*Your Father in heaven does not want ANY of these little ones to be lost.*

Next, Matthew cites another Jesus saying, and applies it to "the church"

(which, of course, wasn't YET "a church" when Jesus himself was teaching).

When conflict arises, and offenses occur, says Matthew's Jesus, as we heard today;  
they are not to be ignored, glossed over, sweet-talked around.  
Offending parties are not to be gossiped about, or denounced in angry words.  
Conflicts are to be straightforwardly, systematically addressed—  
involving as few people as possible, but as many as necessary—  
recognizing the limitations, but respecting the integrity of all involved.  
Every angle must be explored, every voice heard, every informing perspective attended to.  
If reconciliation still remains beyond reach, the break in relationship is acknowledged.  
The unreconciling insider is named an outsider—akin to *a Gentile and a tax collector*.  
But we know how Jesus treated those—as potential disciples, to be ESPECIALLY loved.  
So, reconciliation strategies do shift in realistic response to circumstances.  
But failure to reconnect with one another through apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation—  
THAT, Jesus warns, has eternal consequences—  
what we don't LOOSE on earth stays BOUND in heaven—sobering prospect, that!  
Yet when a community as small as two or three is in harmony—  
nothing can prevent God's love from working through them.  
Love is the one debt that endures—the one thing we owe each other—no matter what.

5) How different that is from the division-driven, partisan-perpetuating, winner/loser, cancel culture now rapidly searing itself deeply into our nation's soul!

The Other as the enemy to whom we have no obligation but their obliteration!  
How unrealistic, how naïve it is of Paul, of Matthew, and of Jesus to suggest  
that NO obligation is ultimately binding, save the debt, the obligation of mutual love!  
The cost of THAT debt is too high, the risk too great, the return too unlikely!  
UNLESS, of course, you trace the vicious, devolving cycles of *YOU OWE ME BIG TIME!*, and  
*IT'S PAYBACK TIME!* that are being tweeted out constantly on our computers,  
and continually played out on our streets.

UNTIL you note the dangerous trajectory on which our social order is currently plummeting.  
Against the ugly, disastrous not unlikely endgame to which this could lead,  
the relentless pursuit of reconciliation—*We owe love ONLY, but ALWAYS*—  
that alternative answer doesn't sound so impractical after all, does it?

It's an answer that doesn't forestall further questions, it fosters them: HERE, NOW—

- How best can the debt of love we owe be not paid off, but offered up to others?
- How best can we receive the love that comes to us not as pay off, but as gift?

All it takes to get that discernment process going is two or three of us.

Because, when we gather in love, to share that love, Christ himself is THERE.