

**Sunday July 19, 2020**

**Sermon / Predigt, Vicar Jordan Smith**

“We are debtors.”

Our reading today starts with a strong statement from Paul and one that I think resonates with many of us. We are debtors. We owe something. Whether we connect that to our business, or our home life, our governments or our spiritual life – most of us feel, at least at times, that we are debtors.

And each of us has a different history related to debt and how we relate to it. For some, it might be gratefulness that the federal government supported millions of people with CERB cheques at great cost. For others, it might be fear about the long-term implications of that debt. It might be student loans that seem to hang over our graduates’ heads for longer and longer with each new cohort, holding them back from opportunities because of financial restrictions. Or a new debt might be a sign of opportunity, of taking out a loan to start a new company or to buy a new home.

But no matter what type of debt or who takes it, there are two questions that apply to every kind – who is it owed to, and how much is it worth?

And so while we tend to talk in our churches about our debt being paid by Christ, we have here today in Romans a pretty clear declaration that we are debtors. To who? To the Spirit of God. And how much? For that we go back one verse – chapter 8, verse 11, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.” We owe our very lives as a debt.

Yet, this debt must be considered in a different way than we usually think of when we owe something. Because this is a debt of life, of opportunity, of being called a child of God today and a hope of things to come. And maybe this is where other translations can help us understand Paul’s point – some Bibles translate the phrase of “we are debtors” as “we are obligated,” or, perhaps the one that demonstrates the point best, the Revised English Bible puts it this way: “Our old nature has no claim on us; we are not obligated to live in that way.”

We are not obligated to live in our old ways, with our old fears, in our old death, because the same spirit that raised Christ from the dead is also giving us life, obligating us not to go back to how things were before, but to a new future. I think of this like someone taking out a loan to turn their passion project into a new business – they are obligated to look forward, to dream about what is to come and how the business can grow. But unlike the business obligation – there is no investment banker to appease, no risk of defaulting – because the lender, the very Spirit who gave us our start is right here beside us, encouraging us along.

In these nineteen weeks since we at Martin Luther Church have gathered in person, in nineteen weeks where much of North America has been changed, where the entire world has shifted its very being, most of us are looking ahead. The first few weeks of the pandemic were spent reacting to what was happening around us, then the next couple months were spent catching our breath. But for the last while, perhaps since mid-May, we have been looking ahead. Sports leagues, looking ahead to holding events with no fans. Hoping to re- start their seasons, hand out their trophies, restore some sense of normalcy, but it's certainly not the full version with packed arenas and stadiums filled with people cheering.

Churches are looking ahead, to smaller gatherings, with different liturgies, a taste of our tradition but certainly not what we are hoping for.

Social supports have been put in place during this pandemic, giving an indication of what is possible for supporting the vulnerable, but these supports have all come with an end date.

Calls have come to look at our police budgets, to prioritize funds for those in need, a discussion that started in the heat of the moment but seems to be dropping off the radar quickly.

Paul says in verse 18 that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.”

We look around us, at what has changed in the past nineteen weeks, and take some comfort in hearing that the sufferings of today are nothing compared to the glory to come. Mary Hinkle Shore takes this thought further though, explaining that “the suffering Paul speaks of is suffering that comes from knowing what the world could be, even as we live in the world as it is.” (1) For

those early Christians in Rome, and for us today, part of our suffering comes not from the persecution or pain we are currently experiencing, but because we have been affected by the Spirit, we know what is possible and we have a vision of that beautiful future. And we suffer in anticipation of its coming.

As we sit in our communities, processing our present suffering and dreaming up ways to put things back to “normal” in the coming months and years, I think the Spirit is pushing us to dream beyond a return to what things were like in March. Because life in March might have felt good, for some of us. It might have seemed pretty good, to most of us. But I think over the events of the past nineteen weeks we are being shown, to use Paul’s language, that we were too much in the flesh. We as a society, we as a church, we as individuals, were too often doing what draws us away from God and away from God’s creation. The creation to which we are intimately tied. The whole creation that is also being set free from bondage and decay has been “groaning in labour pains until now” and we have been unable to hear the cries as we were stuck in our patterns of work and life and trying to get ahead. We were so distracted by the ways of the flesh that we forgot what we heard last week, that the Spirit, the same spirit who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in us.

And because of this we are debtors. Debtors to a gift that has no end, that can grow exponentially if we let it. This is not a debt that needs to be paid back; all we need to do is recognize that we have been woken up yet again to the Spirit’s presence and she is pushing us forward, urging us to use what has been loaned to us to do something new. To look with hope for what’s ahead. Not looking ahead by looking backwards, at what we did before, but looking ahead to what’s possible. At what the great banquet where all are invited might look like, here, today.

David Greenshaw writes that as Christians we have hope because “ in Christ we already have come to know the power of life over death. We already know freedom. We already know love. We have tasted the first fruits, and they have whetted our appetite for the final banquet”.

The Spirit has raised Christ and the Spirit lives in us, giving life to our mortal bodies. The Spirit is active and moving us to look ahead: 2 months, 6 months, 1 year, and gives us a chance to have a foretaste of the full glory yet to be revealed.

This journey is hard. This journey is emotional. This journey is filled with pits and valleys and challenges. But we are not alone. We are children of God and we have received a spirit of adoption so “when we cry, Abba! Father! It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:16). The Spirit is bearing witness with our spirit and with our voices. The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that people will gather again. The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that the Church matters. The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that society’s broken structures can be rebuilt to be likened to the coming kingdom. And we wait with patience for what is not yet seen, with the Spirit dwelling in us, encouraging us to live into our debt, not to the flesh, but to freedom.

Amen

The Peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen