

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost • June 12, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Luke 7:36–8:3

“Indebted”

How much do you owe?

For most of us, that's going to be an uncomfortable question. It's not something that we really talk about with other people – maybe not even with our closest family or friends. If you owe a lot, or even just a little, is that something that causes you to feel ashamed? In our culture, that's not surprising. If you've had to take out a loan, the implication is that you couldn't do whatever you wanted to do on your own. You needed help. Alternatively, you failed in some way and needed someone to bail you out. Being in debt means that someone (or something) has a claim on you. They own some part of you because you've taken what they offered. And while that's not a place that anyone should really want to be, it doesn't stop people from going into debt – often because there's something that they need that seems like it'd be worth the cost.

Debt comes through the choices that we make and the actions that we take. Most homeowners take out loans to buy a place to live. Students dive into debt to finance their education. Consumers, especially here in the United States, purchase everything from groceries they pick up each week to the cars they use commute to the supermarket via different forms of credit. Generally, this all works out because lenders accept our guarantee to pay them back: we'll return what's owed (maybe with interest) through work or investments or some other source of income. Generally, that's how it works.

What happens, though, when you can't pay back your debt? That happens. People sink deeper and deeper into debt with no hope of ever getting out. That's a terrible situation. Can you imagine having to live with that kind of crushing burden? But what if someone just wiped out that debt? You'd be completely free from having to pay it back. No student loan. No mortgage. No credit card payments. How would you feel then? Maybe that's what the woman was feeling as she wept at Jesus' feet.

Each of us carried debt. It doesn't matter how young or old you are, it doesn't matter if you're rich or poor. Every time you've made a choice or taken an action that moves away from God's design for life, you've taken on debt. That's sin. It separates you from God. It drags you down. And you can never pay back this debt to your Creator: you have no tools, no resources, and no hope of making things right with God on your own. Like the woman at the banquet, you and I are sinners. But haven't you heard? Jesus sinners doth receive!

Simon the Pharisee hosted a feast in honor of Jesus. Simon recognized Jesus as an extraordinary teacher a position of great esteem, probably having heard him teaching at the local synagogue. He even allowed for the possibility that this extraordinary rabbi might be a prophet, come to bring God's word to the people. And then *that woman* came in. Simon certainly had not invited her: you didn't share table fellowship with just anyone back then in Israel, especially not someone with her reputation. She came up to Jesus while they were having dinner, crying at his feet and then wiping them with her hair. Simon's estimation of Jesus as a prophet evaporated – he couldn't dream that God's holy messenger would allow such a person to touch him. Jesus must not be who Simon thought him to be.

Jesus was much more than anything the Pharisee could have expected, but he was everything that the weeping woman had hoped. Simon rightly called Jesus, “Teacher.” Yet when Jesus spoke to the woman and said, “Your sins are forgiven.” he showed that he hadn't merely come to teach people about living in a restored relationship with God. He came to make that restored relationship a reality.

Jesus came to cancel the debt of sin: for the woman who wet his feet with her tears, for Simon the Pharisee, for you and me. In the real world, though, you can't just cancel debt without consequence. If you didn't have to pay back your car, your home, your education, who would? These things don't just come for free. Somebody has to carry the cost if you're going to enjoy the benefits. And so it is with the debt of sin. Jesus cancels your debt to your Creator by paying for it himself. Through his perfect life and bitter death on the cross, Jesus took on your debt and wiped it out. He can say, “Your sins are forgiven.” because he guarantees it.

We don't have a record of how that woman came to hear about Jesus, but we can learn from Jesus' words to Simon that it was faith that brought her in to the banquet. She might have heard Jesus preaching the good news of God's kingdom earlier that day – maybe even the same sermon that prompted Simon to

honor Jesus with a feast at his home. How did you hear about Jesus? However it might have happened, in some way, faith has brought you here today. The Holy Spirit brings us to see Jesus, just as He brought in the woman at Simon's house: not to see a prophet, but to hear the one who has come to cancel the debt of our sin and restore us even though we're not worthy to touch him. But that's not the end of it! This Jesus, who is so much more than a mere teacher, so much more than just a prophet, invites you to come and join him at the feast he has prepared with his own body and blood. He wants to share table fellowship with you! Come to the Lord's Supper, then, believing that Jesus can forgive you, no matter what your debt.

When we gather as God's people, we usually pray with the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples: the Lord's Prayer. In the Fifth Petition, we ask, "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Another way of translating the original Greek of that petition is "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." We ask God to wipe away our sin and give us a clean slate. God's forgiveness – His canceling of that debt of sin – doesn't come to you because of what you do. That's the beauty of His grace. God's grace doesn't end with you, though.

Like the woman who poured out fragrant perfume on Jesus' feet, you get to go out and pour out forgiveness when people seek it from you. That's not something you can do on your own. Like Simon the Pharisee, you and I are usually inclined to think that people have to be worthy of our time, and even more so our forgiveness. But as God in Christ has forgiven you, you're called to share the same when someone asks you for it. Since you and I are both still sinners, even as Jesus has made us saints, we need God to work in us and through us to make forgiveness and restored relationships a reality. Like the woman at Simon's banquet, we can only act in grateful love as a result of God's action to forgive us.

How much do you owe? That's no longer the question for you, people for whom God has delivered forgiveness. Here's a better one, one that puts God's love for you in Christ in perspective: **How much *did* you owe?** In Jesus, your debt is canceled.

Amen.