

Debt We Can Live By  
Romans 8:12-17  
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Despite our national economies, and our personal mortgages and credit card accounts which would suggest we are in love with debt, most of us would prefer not to think of ourselves as debtors, as owing anyone anything. Debt strikes at the heart of the notion of our exalted independence precisely because it implies dependence, an obligation, a binding link. Perhaps it is the threat of foreclosure or repossession that gives debt a bad taste in our mouths, but the truth is that it is difficult to live without it. And if that is true economically, how much more difficult is it to live without emotional debt, or relational debt? When someone does us a favor, we are in their debt, or at least we think we are. We use phrases like “I owe you one,” to describe our indebtedness to someone else’s good will. Within families, emotional debt moves back and forth like cash in an informal economy. We may not always like it, but it is hard to escape, even if we could.

The Apostle Paul begins our passage tonight recognizing that reality by saying, “We are debtors, not to the flesh,” but then he gets sidetracked and never actually specifies to what or to whom are we indeed in debt. It’s not really too hard to find a word to fill in the blank, since we get the drift of what he is saying. We could authentically use a lot of words – we are debtors to mercy, as we sometimes sing. We are debtors to grace, to divine favor, to many things, to be sure, but I

think that if he could go back and tidy up his prose, Paul would, at least here in this section of Roman, conclude by saying, “We are debtors, not to the flesh, but to the Spirit.” I say that not only because Paul always likes to juxtapose flesh and spirit, but also because of the special role the Holy Spirit plays in our relationship with God and others. Almost all of chapter 8 is dedicated to Paul’s testimony about the Spirit, even while he is claiming is that it is the Spirit who testifies. He talks both about the spirit as an opposite of the flesh, in a sort of “what is godly and what is not” kind of way, but also about what we call the Holy Spirit, the spirit of God who leads us, prays for us, intercedes for us, dwells in us, helps us in our weakness, is life and peace. All of those descriptions of the Holy Spirit are found in this chapter. And with the Holy Spirit doing so much for us, how can we not feel ourselves indebted to that Spirit? All of those ways of describing how the Spirit puts us in the role of debtor us are beautiful and powerful, but there is one in particular I would like to highlight tonight, because I think it speaks to the mystery we celebrate on Trinity Sunday, not the mystery of how the math works, but the mystery of how God works in our lives.

Listen again to these wonderful words: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness within our spirit that we are children of God.” This is how it seems to work, that the Holy Spirit confirms for the human spirit its

relationship with God's Spirit. Let me say that again. The Holy Spirit confirms for the human spirit its relationship with God's Spirit. Earlier Paul has said that the Holy Spirit dwells within us, and there comes a time when that Spirit starts to move, to vibrate, to resonate, to communicate, to get our human spirit moving at the Holy Spirit's divine frequency, to bring it to life, to a spirit-filled life. Paul seems to be saying that without the Spirit testifying, bearing witness, doing its thing, that we would go through life being aware of only a portion of what's really out there, and missing out on the good stuff, the good stuff of being a debtor.

And so, on this Trinity Sunday, we remember that it is the Spirit who makes us aware of the fullness of God in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Without that Spirit, our bread and wine is just bread and wine, not the body and blood. Without that Spirit, our worship is just a meeting of friends, not a fellowship of the one body of Jesus Christ. Without that Spirit, our faith is just an opiate of the masses, and not a sustaining, life giving relationship with the Holy Trinity. Without that Spirit, we don't know we are adopted children, not orphans. Without that Spirit, our perspective of God is a clinical and detached one, not the intimate portrait painted by Paul and so many others. Without that Spirit, we wouldn't know that before the Trinity was ever made into a formal Church doctrine and article of faith, it was a witness to the authentic divine relationship on which we could base our human relationships. That is debt we can live by.

Now, when we talk about having a debt, we usually end up talking about repayment. But here's the good news of the Gospel, that even though we are debtors, we don't really owe God anything, certainly not anything we can repay. That's grace. We will never have enough money to pay it back. We can never be perfect enough to pay it back. We can't even be simply grateful enough, which is about the only real currency we have! But we can choose to live into the fullness of the relationships suggested by the doctrine of the Trinity, and in that way give honor and glory to the God who has chosen us, and made us not only acceptable and legal, but loved. I think that not only is that all God expects of us, but more than enough for any of us to try and tackle in a lifetime.

And just what is what I have called "the fullness of the relationships suggested by the Trinity?" Let me suggest one perhaps imperfect way, but one related to the very language of our passage today, the language of adoption. It is with more than a little trepidation that I speak about adoption, not being an adopted child myself. But I have looked enough into their experiences to know that the act of adoption does not miraculously solve their problems, or take away their feelings of loss and abandonment. Adoption has certain romantic notions attached to it, with a certain nobility attributed to the parents, a sense of heroism, and even self-sacrifice about it. Children go from a having no family, to having a full family, from being bereft of love and attention to being showered with it. Parents take on additional responsibility, possibly acquiring problems generated by someone else's

DNA or upbringing. On the surface, it should be the answer to every orphan's dreams, but in fact it often opens up or reopens as many questions as it answers. Why was I abandoned or left behind? Was I not loveable enough? Why did God take my parents away from me? Will these parents leave me too? And as if those tough questions weren't enough, what is often added in by well-meaning bystanders, whether family or others, is the pressure for the adopted child to be particularly grateful for having been plucked out of despair and placed into paradise. Many adoptees are constantly reminded of how lucky they are that their new parents took the noble step of adoption and saved them from a life in an orphanage, or of material and emotional deprivation. What many adoptees end up feeling is anger, resentment, or undue pressure to achieve, none of which should be part of the adoption package. They take on an unwelcome kind of debt far different from the kind of debt whose virtues I've just been extolling.

Please do not misunderstand me: adoption is a wonderful, godly act, responding to real human needs, and mirroring God's own heart, and many adoptions are the greatest of blessings in the lives of all involved, but as with all human institutions, adoption too is imperfect, and this unwelcome debt of gratitude about which I speak is a burden not shared by children from more traditional families. To be sure, all children should be grateful for their parents, for the sleepless nights, for the changing of dirty diapers, for the worry and the hope and the prayers, and that is precisely my point, that none should have to bear an

unwelcome debt when we all bear the same debt. You see, we have all received the Spirit of adoption, and God asks no greater burden of gratitude from some of us than others.

This is what I mean by living into the fullness of the relationships God has given us: being attentive first to our own relationship with God, and then by putting away the misdeeds of the flesh that make arbitrary distinctions between us. You see, even as seemingly benign and unintentional a feeling as pity can create the kind of debt that paralyzes. You see, when we suggest that an adopted child consider him or herself especially lucky what we are really saying is that “there but for the grace of God go I,” that I could be in your position, lost, rescued and now indebted, and thank God I am not. Remember what the Pharisee prayed in the temple, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people, the thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even this tax collector.” But I would call that what Paul calls “the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear” because it looks to the past rather than to the future, it says, “There but for the grace of God go I,” rather than “There because of the grace of God go I,” a subtle difference to be sure, but the same difference between the spirit of fear and the spirit of adoption. You see, the spirit of adoption is a spirit of courage, and of confidence, but also a spirit of humility and of a grounding in God and God’s grace. We are all to be most pitied, but let us dwell on our own pity rather than the pity of others.

This is just one of so many ways we allow what Paul calls “the flesh” to determine the character of our relationships. Whether it comes from a place of fear or insecurity or judgment or anxiety, when we make the kind of distinctions between us that have no place in the life of the Spirit, we miss out on the character of relationship we see between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that we could see amongst ourselves. May the Spirit always testify to us both that we are indeed children of God, and when we need to remember that about everyone else too. Amen.