

Sermon: Indebtedness
Text: Romans 8:12-25
Date: May 27, 2018
Context: WWPC
Memorial Day Sunday
Outdoor worship
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors . . .

Romans 8:12a

I suspect that every preacher who has ever delivered more than one sermon has certain biases, which they bring to the sermon-writing process.

As I have mentioned before, one of mine is that I tend to favor the gospels over the epistles as preaching texts.

The reason for this is pretty straightforward. The teachings of Jesus most often come to us in story, and the teachings of Paul...do not.

Pick any of his epistles: Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians: they each address different topics but they have one thing in common.

They do not read like stories. They don't even read like letters, really. They read less like epistles and more like lectures.

And they tend to veer around a bit from one subject to the next, to the point where it is sometimes a little difficult to discern their main point.

Today's text is a perfect example. In just a brief span of a dozen or so verses Paul references debtors, flesh, slavery, fear, adoption, suffering, creation, hope and salvation.

So, these waters are a little muddy but I wanted to wade into them today for two reasons. One because on this Memorial Day Sunday I believe the idea of adoption into the family of God is important, and worth some consideration.

Someone once said that God has no grandchildren. The thought here is that the Christian faith is not a family tradition, like a tartan you inherit in virtue of being a member of the McClendon clan.

Rather, on this view, faith is something that everyone has to give thought to and consider for themselves.

Personally, I think the truth is somewhere in between. Yes, faith is an individual matter. It's not something you automatically inherit like a tartan, or a family home in Montreat.

But it's also true that almost no one comes to faith on their own. I would go out on a limb and say that all of us who are gathered in this space today owe our presence here to the influence of someone who preceded us in the faith, someone who handed their faith -- the Christian faith -- down to us.

In the opening line of the passage we read Paul tells us that we are debtors, not to the flesh, but -- presumably -- to the spirit.

He doesn't actually finish the thought and specify who it is to whom we are debtors, but that is the clear implication: we are debtors to the Spirit.

I'm not 100% sure I know what that means but intuitively I believe Paul is right on that point.

But I also believe we're not just debtors to the Spirit. We are debtors to grandparents or parents or mentors who nurtured us along in our own faith, who showed us what that faith looks like not just by the words they said, and the lessons they taught us, but by the way they lived, and the things they did.

So I realize this is a sort of Christian appropriation of Memorial Day, but on this particular Sunday I think it's helpful to remember our forebears in the faith, and to acknowledge our indebtedness to them for the great gift of faith they conveyed to us.

To explain how we're going to do that, I need to back up just a bit.

If you were here at this service last year, you may remember that we had a visitor. A gentleman who happened to be visiting the campus joined us for worship. It was kind of an accidental thing.

Turns out his father was an alum of Warren Wilson from way back in the day, and he -- the father -- had recently passed away.

So, as part of his own observance of Memorial Day, the son had come here to scout out a place to inter his father's ashes -- which he happened to have in the trunk of his car.

As he was wandering around in the Formal Gardens, he heard the sound of singing coming from right here in the Pavilion. Intrigued, he then wandered down here and ended up taking a seat and joining us for worship.

During the service, he told the story of how he had come back to Wilson to honor his father's memory and wishes.

He then went on to testify as to how pleased and surprised he was to have found a church like ours. He lived in a very conservative town in east Tennessee and he simply did not know there were churches out there that openly and honestly stood for the things we stand for.

He came here to remember his father and he ended up helping to lead our service. I'm fairly certain his testimony -- for that's what it was -- his testimony easily eclipsed my sermon as the thing people remembered from the day. Right? (Don't answer that!)

This was a helpful reminder that the act of preaching, that is, the proclamation of Good News, can come to us in a variety of ways, including in the act of remembrance.

So today, I'd like to invite you to share your story, your remembrance, of someone who passed their faith along to you....

* * *

The other reason I've chosen this text for today -- and not to worry, this will be brief -- has to do with where this day falls on the calendar. On the civic calendar

this is obviously Memorial Day Sunday. But on the church calendar, this is Trinity Sunday.

You may find this a little bit surprising but there aren't that many places in the Bible where the three members of the Trinity as we understand them are explicitly and distinctly named as they are here:

When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God . . . joint heirs with Christ.

If your first thought is . . . *And?* that is the right response.

We saw again last week that in scripture it's questions, not answers that drive the biblical narrative forward. And while there is no specific question resident in this text, it certainly raises a big one.

As Debie Thomas recently discovered. You may remember Debie's name also from last week.

She was the one whose vivacious and interesting friend became a Christian through the ministry of Intervarsity and whose other friend worried that this talented and interesting young woman would now become boring and start speaking only Christianese.

Debie also tells a story from later in her life about her encounter with a young boy who asked her a question that we have perhaps all asked at some point.

Here's how she tells it (this is from her essay, *Start with the Three*, published in *Journeys with Jesus*, May 20, 2018):

I was watering plants on my patio a few weeks ago when my neighbor's son — an 8th grader — peeked over the fence and started telling me about his recent Bar Mitzvah celebration.

After we'd chatted for a bit about the party, the guests, and the "awesome" gifts he'd received, he asked, "Your family is Christian, right?"

"Yes," I said. "Born and raised."

"Why do Christians believe in three gods?" His tone was solemn and earnest.

“We don’t. Actually, we believe in the same God you do. Just...differently.” This was a lame answer, I knew, but I hoped sort of desperately that it would suffice.

It didn’t. “No,” he pressed on. “I mean the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost thing. That’s Christian, isn’t it?” He looked at me with a truly puzzled expression. “I don’t get it.”

“Neither do I, honey,” was what I wanted to say. But he looked so genuinely bewildered that I sighed and fumbled my way through all the inadequate explanations I’d heard as a kid:

“God is sort of like water! Water exists in three states, right? Liquid, solid, and gas? God’s like that! Or, like an egg! The shell, the eggwhite, and the yolk? Three parts, one egg! Or, um, a three-leaf clover! Or a tree! The roots, the trunk, and the branches — but they make up one tree, right? Or... or a triangle!”

“The look of confusion on his face only deepened. For a minute his politeness warred with his curiosity, but then he blurted out the inevitable: “What’s the point of believing in three gods? “Why three? What difference does it make?”

Here’s my response. Why three? What difference does it make?

Because it tells us about the divine life. If it’s true what scripture says, if it’s true what Jesus says, that God is love, then God has to be more than one.

Because love does not exist in isolation; love is only realized and expressed and experienced in relationship. And that’s even true for God.

So, thanks to the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, we have come to understand that the members of the Trinity exist in a state of what Moltmann calls *perichorisis*: eternal, interpenetrating, interdependent love.¹

Or to put that more simply, in a phrase coined by Nadia Boltz Weber: God is not a me God. God is a we God (quoted by Debie Tomas in *Start with the Three*).

The Trinity reveals to us something essential about the nature of the divine life. And this in turn tells us something essential about our life, too.

¹ Other Christian theologians used the term “perichorisis” before Moltmann, but he is generally credited for bringing the term to widespread, most famously in his book *The Trinity and the Kingdom*.

We are not just a me people, we are a we people. We are not just a collection of random individuals, thrown together by chance. We are more than that. We are a congregation, a group of people who exist in a relationship of perichorisis, of interpenetrating, interdependent love.

Which is to say that, together, in all our diversity, we are members of the Body of Christ.

Or in still simpler terms, terms Debie Thomas's young neighbor could easily understand: here's the church, here's the steeple, open the doors (or walk into the Pavilion) and see all the people!