

The Economy of Forgiveness

Colleagues,

Summertime here in the northern hemisphere. Hot here in the USA heartland. Energy sags. So I've dug up some stuff from antiquity, from the days when energy was at a higher level. I'd actually forgotten about this one. But when Valparaiso University last Advent published a devotion book with gleanings from the chapel, there to my surprise was one of mine from back in the 70s of the previous century. That's even the previous millennium! So here it is, a meditation on Matthew 18:15-20. Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

The Economy of Forgiveness

The "Personals" section of our newspaper recently carried this item: "SCOTT Please come home or call. We love you. MOM & DAD." If Scott listens, these parents have gained their son. If not, he stays lost.

Behind all such losses is one who sins against another. A "family" falls into "commercial" or "legal" relationships as Debtors and Creditors. First, you lose your brother. Then, by some cosmic order, you don't just end up with nothing, but a debtor replaces the brother. Even that wouldn't be so bad if we didn't make such a "big deal" out of it.

– You Owe Me, and I Owe You. We're just settling accounts.

We chronically do exactly that, however. We cling to

debtor/creditor relationships and hold others there. This applies not only to the creditors who hold debtors ("You did me wrong, and I want my pound of flesh!"), but also to debtors who have a perverse love/hate ambivalence about their debtor situation. We persist in debtor/creditor relationships because they offer the tempting promise of saving our lives. As a creditor, getting my pound of flesh allows me to save face, self-esteem, and finally my life. The permanent debtor mirrors the creditor, for permanent debt guarantees constant attention from my creditor. If she hates me, she at least pays attention to me. I count. I'm worth someone's attention. I even get a part of her life in this deficit accounting game. Through my indebtedness, I control her. She's not "free" of me.

Sisters and brothers remain lost amidst these bookkeeping transactions by which we seek to save ourselves. We lose each other, and finally ourselves.

– A New Look at the Books

Jesus offers new insight into this problem by upsetting the ledger books we bank on. "Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." That's upsetting. Life is not a win-or-lose situation, nor does everybody win. Initially, we all lose. Thus, the central issue in the ledger of life is how you do your losing. Sinners cannot escape losing their lives. But in one way of losing life you gain life. Moreover, that life is full of brothers and free of debtors. It is the way of the cross.

First the gospel breaks open the trap of our self-inflicted debtor/creditor salvation. God in Christ opens the cosmic trap by bearing in his body on the cross the debts of all whose accounts are so mortally overdrawn. On Easter morning with the opening of the tomb, he offers escape from the dead end of our

debtor's prison. The good news of his death and resurrection provides an alternate source for gaining our lives. The data of old debits and credits remain, but we needn't try to gain our lives from them. Instead, we gain our lives by "losing them for his sake." How? By holding on to Christ in faith as he holds on to us. By trusting him when he takes our debtor's page and says, "I'll sign for that."

When it comes to lost brothers like Scott, the second use of the gospel is to open the trap of our debtor/creditor relationships. How do you lose a debtor and gain a daughter or mother, a husband or wife, a brother or sister? You do as was done to you. You escape debtor status and become God's child, sibling of His only-begotten Son, by forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the only way to restore families. Christ calls us to forgive when "the brother sins against us." Confront him "between you and him alone." Don't grab him by the neck and demand, "Pay me what you owe!" Jesus' parable tells the deadly consequence – for the creditor! – of such confrontation.

A Christian – the already-forgiven former debtor – brings the word of forgiveness into the conversation when the two of them get together. Only forgiveness has the power to "gain" brothers. That is what the Creator created as the power for salvation. As God Himself well knows, forgiveness does not always work. Debtors and creditors can and do refuse to become sisters and brothers. Scotts do refuse to come home. But nothing else will work at all! That's the punch line in Jesus' counsel that if all attempts at forgiveness fail, "let him be to you as a gentile and a tax-collector." Jesus did not write off such folks as bad debts. No, in his ledger they remain candidates for forgiveness, not really different from us who learn to pray "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" – daily.

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” This is the Lord’s final promise that our forgiving is worth the risk. Why? Because he himself is on the scene when it transpires. The business we pursue is after all his business – and his Father’s as well.

Were it not for his pioneering such forgiveness economics with God’s debtors in his body on the cross, we should have no light (and no right) to settle accounts except by debits and credits. That firstborn Son, our Brother, continues to pursue his business right “in the midst” of us when two or three of us “gather in his name.”

– You Can Go Home Again, Scott, Free

The ad for Scott appeared among the “Personals.” It could just as well have been in the “Lost and Found.” The gospel of forgiveness is God’s way of going after lost people, and he commends it to us for finding our own lost ones. If Scott listens to their words of forgiving love, Mom and Dad gain their son. But forgiveness must happen – explicitly, concretely, palpably – to offset the debit/credit claims that will arise willy-nilly, else everybody stays lost. That is hard – a kind of death, no less – for us credit managers. The alternative is easier, though it means surer death and guaranteed loss. When we live by forgiveness, death becomes “dying with the Lord,” losing “for my sake and the gospel’s.” It carries the heartening conclusion: “you will gain your life . . . and your brother as well.” Amen