

What have you done?

Mark 2:1-12

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And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2 And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room for them, not even about the door; and he was preaching the word to them. 3 And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. 4 And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and when they had made an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic lay. 5 And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven." 6 Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7 "Why does this man speak thus? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 8 And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question thus in your hearts? 9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your pallet and walk'? 10 But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins" -- he said to the paralytic -- 11 "I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home." 12 And he rose, and immediately took up the pallet and went out before them all; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"

“What have you done?” Isn’t that one of the first things that someone thinks when you hear someone say to another person: “your sins are forgiven”?

But, what if the person who is forgiven is a little boy, and if the one forgiving his sins has only just met the boy?

That’s what happens in the Gospel reading today. So, “what has this little boy done?” might not be the best question for us to ask.

Much more likely is it that Jesus is drawing on a common, cultural understanding that suggested that this little boy was suffering not just the consequences of his sins but the sins of his parents, those of his grandparents, or any other members of his extended family.

This is scary stuff: it means that anyone who lived before you could have done something for which you, even as a child, are still suffering the consequences. Like the descendants of Cain, your great-great-great-great-grandfather Cain had done something, but you would still be suffering the consequences of what he had done.

If you find this hard to imagine this cultural practice, then imagine something universal that you might find easier: debt. Imagine that one, distant member of your family, whom you never met, never knew, because he lived hundreds of years before you, incurred a debt that never got paid off. Every year the debt remained there and interest accrued, year after year, decade after decade, century after century. It compounded exponentially until you and all of your ancestor's descendants owed so much that you could never pay it off. The weight of the debt became so heavy that it consumed everything you earned, and everything your family earned. Nothing you or anyone else in your family did would allow you to escape.

The burden became unbearable. So you considered what to do:

- Maybe you could earn some extra money somehow to chip away at the debt, and then you looked at the fact that it would take you longer to pay off the debt at that rate than it took for the debt to accumulate to the level that it is now,
- Maybe you think of going to see the creditors, but then realize that some of your other relatives tried to do this and all they got was a lecture on the tough lessons of life,
- Maybe you consider declaring bankruptcy but then realize that your whole extended family would have to do as well, and everyone in your family would be left without,
- Finally you despair and consider killing yourself. You take one last look at your family, you remember the good times, how different it all could have been. You leave the house to find the right place to do the deed.

And then...

And then you hear the noise in the distance, coming from a house. People are pressing their way forward. You press against them too and are pushed to the window where you watch as some men make a hole in the flimsy roof of the house and lower a little boy into the centre of a crowd where a man sits. Without moving, the man looks up at the four men who had lowered the stretcher and he smiles at them. Then he turns his face to the little boy and says: "the debt that has led you to this state is now cancelled".

For a moment you can't believe your ears at what you are hearing. But, before you can ask anyone around you who the man is, the men around him – all of whom look as if they must be bankers or real estate agents – say to him: "you have no right to say that". The man in the middle of the room turns to them and says: "What do you

mean I have no right? I do if I've been given that power. And I have. Go home, little boy, and live your life as if you were starting over from scratch today". The little boy gets up and walks through the crowd.

"As if you were starting over from scratch today". As the words are ringing in your ears, you find the man in the middle of the room scanning the crowd gathered around him as if looking for something. And then he catches sight of your face in the window, and he smiles at you, just as if he had found exactly what he was looking for. It is a smile that was just like the one he had smiled at the men on the roof..

My friends, for the past week you have been hearing the OT stories of the terrible debt that began to be incurred over generations by different ancestors of Jacob: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the generation of Noah.

What you have not seen, though, are the individual faces of people who laboured under that debt for millennia after them, and for whom the interest on the debt grew to become so oppressive by the day of Jesus that all that anyone in the family of Israel could think of was how to cope, while the bankers and real-estate agents of the land of Israel stood guard over what they considered their investment.

This Sunday, by the grace of God, you will hear the Gospel reading you have heard today, a reading in which an unassuming prophet like figure, Jesus, declares to a little boy the cancellation of the astounding debt in his case. A second chance, a chance to live his own life without the oppressive debt, hanging around his neck, drowning in debt which debilitated even his physical body. Because that's exactly what Jesus offers: cancellation of the debt burden of generations.

One face a time. Jesus doesn't declare a general amnesty, even when they hang him from the cross and he has one last chance to do so. What he does is declare to a few and then charge a few good men and women -- whom the prophet Daniel had equated with the Son of Man when he called them "the saints of the Most High" - who will go forth and pronounce to other individuals in other families in Asia, Europe, and Africa the cancellation of their debts. He will charge them, either during his life or from heaven, to go forth and pronounce the cancellation of debt to all those who come earnestly seeking a second chance. Their job will not be to berate those who come - because those who come to this little group of men and women already know that they have a problem, that they're drowning in it - but who come for healing, knowing that the son of Man and the saints of Most High have come not to minister to the healthy and the wealthy but to the sick and to those drowning in debt from past generations of slavery or slaveholding, of alcoholism, of sexual abuse, of genetic sickness.

He, and you and I after him, offer them the cancellation of their debt not so that they can once again go out and incur debt like their ancestors, but so that debt-free,

they can live freely. The one in whose name Jesus declares a year of jubilee, our God, even goes so far as to give those who are forgiven all that they need to guide them in this new life of freedom, the Spirit. But note: the Spirit is not a guarantee, but a surety, as Paul says, it is given in trust that if not made good use of, the Spirit and the debt will both be payable back to God at the end.

And so, you and I need to remind those who have been freed that they have been freed for a purpose. It is not to try to chip away at the debt, as Israel thought, through ritual means of placating God. Rather our goal for which God gives us the Spirit is to live fully the life that God has given us and to bring the same life to others in our families and even among our enemies.

What I trust that you will look for and find this Sunday are those faces on the roof, on the stretcher, or at the window, people who, when they hear the Gospel declaration, will say to themselves: Could this also be a declaration for me: my debt has been cancelled and I can start over?

So, this Sunday when you hear this Gospel or when you read this Gospel, look around and see if you can see those hungering for a second chance. Welcome them and speak to them words that reflect the authority given to the priesthood of all believers: your debt is cancelled; you are free. You may even want to look in a mirror, and remind yourself, that the same words have also been spoken to you, and that you, too, have had your debt cancelled, and that's why you are and will be doing what you are already doing now.