**[1]** Seventh Sunday After Epiphany (Feb 23, 2025)
Sermon Title: Shaken and Stirred
Scripture: Luke 6:27-38
Theme: ‘Owe nothing, except to love” (Rms. 13:8) Love is to your credit; the love debt.

“Owe nothing, except to love,” writes Paul in Romans 13:8. In other words, when it comes to the love debt, it is to our credit to love first and ask questions later.
**[2]** Luke gives us a strange example (Luke 9:51) of this when he describes for us an incident that occurred while Jesus and the disciples are beginning their ‘Lenten’ journey toward Jerusalem. The setting is a Samaritan village. Jesus had just finished teaching the disciples about true profit and loss, asking the question: “What does it profit us if we gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit ourselves in the process?” (Lk. 9:25) Jesus sent some of the disciples into a Samaritan village to determine if they might be welcome in staying there. The village does not welcome them and sends them back with a message that Jesus and the disciples are not welcome there, to go on their way to Jerusalem and not look back to the village ever again. James and John are furious with the villagers; “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (Lk. 9:54). Now, Luke does not tell us why, but he does say that Jesus rebuked his disciples for even thinking about such a response. We have to go to a footnote to find out why, the footnote giving us an additional verse of scripture: “You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of humans but to save them.” This gives us the reason, but we again have to look in the footnote to find it.

Often, we give Simon Peter a thumbs-up for his ready confession of Jesus as the Messiah, a willingness to speak up when others were silent about Jesus. But, sometimes, we give Peter a thumbs-down, for setting his mind on human things rather than divine things. Peter did not want to hear what lay in store for Jesus as Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem. Peter was one to wield the sword first and ask questions later, as he did in Gethsemane; Peter wanted to believe that Jesus would bring the kingdom of God to earth as a conqueror; he could not even imagine the non-earthly kingdom that Jesus had in mind.  Peter was in the mind set of defending honor rather than offering life. I think, if we take a good look, we too might be inclined to do the same as Peter. With one so dear to us as Jesus, we TOO might be one to draw the sword quickly to protect our Messiah. We TOO might tend to think of human things before thinking of divine things, unable to imagine a reign of God without castles and armies and weapons.  We TOO might want to advise Jesus against speaking about suffering in the public arena.  “Master, don’t let them hear you predicting your death.”  We, like Peter, might have a mind set to defend honor rather than offer life.

**[3]** This comparison of heavenly things and earthly things is confusing to say the least. On the one hand, Jesus tells us that being trustworthy in small things is a precondition for being trustworthy in large things. But, does this mean that being trustworthy in earthly things is a precondition for being trustworthy in heavenly things.  Not so much.  On one occasion, as you may remember, Jesus praises the earthly shrewdness of the dishonest manager who uses wealth to make friends, lowering their amount of debt, no doubt with an expectation of possibly getting something in return down the stretch, a little investment in good relations for the long haul (800 bushels of wheat instead of 1000; 450 gallons of oil instead of 900, and so on.)  It’s the old principle of: “I scratch your back and you scratch mine;” we do not care whether the management books look good or not; in this way of thinking, it is more important to have good friends in many places, than it is to be a purist in managing the books.

Jesus gives us the reason:  God does not value importance as we value importance. God is on a different priority system than Mammon.  In other words, heaven’s accounting books do not look like human accounting books. Your human management skills are not necessarily transferable to divine management systems.  Paul tells us (in 1 Cor. 13:6) that “love does not keep a list of wrongs,” so we know that God’s management system does not have a Profit/Loss Column or a balance sheet of rights to wrongs.  It does have a grace eraser, no doubt, that continually wipes the slate clean. There are no accounting journal entries to consider. There is only a clean slate in Jesus Christ. And, to go a step further, Jesus represents God’s willingness to risk everything divine in the person of Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, to risk everything on our account-- all of eternity, on our account. So, yes, the Bible leaves us a bit confused on this score; yet down the stretch, the Bible is consistent about what is truly profitable and what is not.

If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. (Ex 22:25). “Do not turn aside after worthless things that cannot profit you or deliver you, for they are empty.” (1 Sam. 12:21) And, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” (Is. 55:1).

You may be familiar with the television advertisement for the Capitol One credit card ending with the question: “What’s in your wallet?” The question implies you should have the best credit card in your wallet and not a competitor’s card.  Today, we are asking a similar question related to our faith and not to something as secular as a credit card: ‘What’s in your wallet or, rather, what’s on your doorpost?’ Is the Shema on your doorpost? Is Love for God and for others on your doorpost?

There is a phrase in the Lord’s prayer that addresses this topic: “forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.” In the original Greek, “forgive us our sins, as we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.” (Matthew 6:9-14 and Luke 11:2-4) Matthew uses “debts” and Luke uses a combination of “sins” and “debts.”   Now, add in what Mark has to say:  “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”   (Mark 11:25-26)   Together, these account for what we sometimes see as so many different versions of the Lord’s Prayer.

Literally, trespasses in the Greek means "falling away" or "falling aside."  From this idea we get the term "false steps" or "transgressions", a side-slip , a lapse or deviation.  Matthew's words suggest "debtors" in the sense of one who is obligated to do or pay something.  Matthew follows the Aramaic word “*chowb*” (  חובא  ) which means "to owe", but which has an underlying meaning of "to tie

together".  There is an old saying that those who go in debt together stay together. Yes, there is a sense in which Matthew's "debtors" implies an indebtedness that creates or honors a connection between people.  "Forgive us our broken relationships" as we have forgiven those who are under obligation to us or those who have placed us under obligation. Then, there is the language of Luke,

"forgive us our sins",  the word here meaning a departure from the way of righteousness or the result or state of being so departed. Sin is being separated from each other and divided in our loyalties. But, notice that Luke follows “sins” with a different sense "as we have forgiven those indebted to us".  In this way, Luke associates "debt" or financial obligation with sin or alienation. And, so we come to Paul’s declaration: “to owe nothing to anyone except to love one another." (Romans 13:8)  A good debt is when love obligates us.   If we must owe, let us owe to the power that heals us rather than the power that divides us.

**[4]** Larry Burkett and Ron Blue, in their famous book, “Your Money after the Big 5-0” write: "Recent surveys show...59 percent of us expect to carry debt of some form into retirement and 46 percent have saved less than $50,000 towards retirement."

In a smaller community, we mostly know our debtors, those obligated to pay us.  They are not so far away and we can sometimes see how our lives are bound up with those who owe us and to those whom we owe something.   It is a little more personal.   But, for so many today, we never see our creditors, so

it is harder to feel the binding that occurs when we sign our names on the dotted line.   Jesus reminds us that the spiritual debt we owe, he has paid in full.  What we now owe to him is to love one another.  But, can we really speak of love, if we lose our moral voice because of our debt?   If our ability to give dwindles so very much because of what we owe.

“God made us alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands.  He set this aside nailing it to the cross. Col 2:13-14

Do you remember the gospel story of the woman who anoints Jesus with an expensive perfume? Many in my generation used to call this story, the story about “holy waste.” Yet, it is not about fraud and waste, really, so much as it is about love of others. What does Jesus teach us in this story: “I tell you, because her many sins have been forgiven, she has loved much. The one who has been forgiven little loves little. (Lk. 7:47)

But, then there is this really big accounting question: What is the fair value of each asset in heaven’s inventory? How do we measure value in heaven’s terms? What would you give in return for your life?  What does it profit anyone to gain the whole world, but then to lose their soul in the process?  Some versions say: “life” instead of “soul,” but the original Greek implies that it is more than just life that is at stake here.  The Greek word implies not just the vital life principle inside of each of us which we call “life,” not just the “rational mind” inside of our heads which allows us to carry on a meaningful life, but it means even more.  That something more is this: it means the God-touched side of ourselves, God’s wiggle in the rabbit, if you will, the unique personhood created by God, the specific gift which is the image of God inside of us, ensouled within us by the breathing of God into us.  It is more than *ruwach* or *chay*, it is the part of us that we call *nephesh*, it is the part of us that God puts his own holy being into.  Traditionally, following Greek philosophy, we have called this soul. Yet there is a side-bar to this discussion: “What would you give in return for the image of God inside of you?  What does it profit anyone to gain the whole world, but then to lose the image of God inside? In the verse immediately before, which uses the exact same word, Jesus gives us an even better understanding of this soul, “those who want to save their soul will lose it, but those who will lose their soul for my sake will find it.” DOES this not sound just a bit like what Paul says about Jesus: “that though he was in the form of God, he did NOT regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” It is not about grasping our soul and hanging on for all eternity. It is not an ownership thing, as if we could own our soul, lock it up in an unbreakable vault so we might never lose it. No, we cannot own it away, we must use it for Christ. To keep it we must lose it, or give it away, for the sake of Christ.

Now this is a hard word for us! Do you remember a situation in the Roman church, when Paul offers to give up his own soul so that others might come to Christ. (Rom. 9:3) He says, I would rather be a castaway if I thought it could help in redeeming another. Paul is willing to give it all away for the sake of Christ, even the intangibles, even the spirit inside of him. Nothing is off the table for Paul. So, I am amazed that Paul has so much trust in God’s promise that he would let go of what he has to get even more than what he has. Yet, this is the very definition of lingering behind for the stragglers, the ones at the rear, of placing ourselves on the edge for another, for the lost sheep, for the prodigal son, for the confessing thief on the cross beside Jesus. To stand beside the prodigal son and say “I am a prodigal son,” or to stand beside Zaccheus, and say “I am a tax collector also,” or to stand by the thief on the cross, and say “I am a confessing thief,” I will share your destiny with you, or to stand beside the woman caught in adultery, and say “I will take the hurled rocks with you.” (Let him who is without sin throw the first stone, yet Jesus who is without sin chose not to throw any rocks or to condemn.”)  This is an extremely hard word!

I cannot even fathom such love, that anyone might lay down their life for the sake of their friend,” (John 15:13) powerful, powerful statements. (Yes, it is the same word for ‘soul; sometimes translated as life, as we have seen in the other passages this morning.)  Greater love, there is not, says Jesus, than to lay down your soul for a friend.  Such a hard word! It can only be by the grace of God that anyone could offer themselves so completely, to offer their own soul, their own image of God, for another. I can see why many want to translate this word as “life” and not “soul.” I can understand why, it is such a hard word when you translate it more literally.  We can scarcely take it in.  It is so far beyond us.  And yet, how do we account for those who have died in war for their friends? How do we account for those parents who offer their lives in exchange for their children? How do we account for such courageous offers that we know are given every day somewhere in the world?  The human spirit, when combined with the grace of God, is so very amazing. Now, it should be obvious that if everyone gives up their soul for someone else, we would have a lot of soul-less people in the world, but this is a false logic. This logic comes from those who would rather not give away their soul for the sake of anyone, much less Jesus. But, if we are willing to offer all of ourselves to Jesus, even out very soul, then this sincere offer alone changes us inside and out. Such a transformation is seriously imaginable, because we have seen it so very often, as people offer their precious kidneys to others so that those [**6]** others can live, as, in December 1982, so many years ago now, the dentist Barney Clark offered his body for a transplant that helped others in his same condition. Greater love … you say!

Some have thought along these lines, that if we have the biggest threat, with the biggest bomb, with most power, that we can force others to comply or submit. Some say, ‘It only takes the willingness to carry out the threat and that will be enough to guarantee that the threat never has to be carried out.’  But, Jesus is
saying just the opposite, which is not false logic, but true logic: If our offer to give ourselves away is big enough, and true enough, the offer itself can insure that the offer never has to be carried out, that we never actually have to give up our souls. If we are ready to carry out the nuclear option of love rather than hate, then the love itself should be enough to raise everyone into that greater love of redemption. If we trust God enough with our souls, then the promise is, and must be, real and true. God will never leave us without our souls if we give our souls away for the sake of Christ Jesus, for the sake of the love of God which Jesus represents so well. But, is such an offer of love practical? Perhaps not, it is after all a very tough word to hear!  It is true that we are not all called to such deep devotion. I would never want to leave a sense of guilt with you, or anyone else, on this matter. Jesus does not emotionally manipulate us to hold guilt over our heads.  This saying of Jesus is not emotional blackmail. Jesus does not work like that. But, Jesus offers himself in such a way, offers his divinity and his humanity, in such a way, that he shows the principle of truth here. If we are willing to lose our souls for Jesus, we will always receive them back a thousand-fold, ten-thousand-fold and more. It’s a win-win situation; and we are working for the God of the universe who can make all things happen, even more the impossible, even more when we risk all to receive all. Such an investment in love will always receive true profit.

I leave you with a word from Nadia Bolz-Weber, sung at her Red-State Revival this past month, which we in a makeshift choir sang with her that same evening:
If you are overwhelmed, discouraged, distraught, then just sing the following:
“Put one foot in front of the other and lead in love!”

Alleluia! Amen.