

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family**Title: We Are Debtors...****Lesson: Numbers 21: 4-9; John 3:14-21 NRSV**

*Numbers 21:*⁴ From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” ⁶ Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷ The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” ⁹ So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

*John 3:*¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do

what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

A few weeks ago, confirmation class had time to learn about Confession. At that time, I explained that we are sinners before we know and realize God’s love and grace, but when we believe in Jesus Christ as our savior, we become His children. I also told the youth that we should realize that we are sinners.

To describe us as sinners is what we often hear in church. Personally, I started going to church when I was a baby with my parents, and that’s how my journey of faith began. And, I’ve heard the expression: “We are sinners” and I’m very used to confessing that I’m a sinner. Perhaps most of you also are used to confessing to God that we are sinners. I thought about how to teach this confession to children or non-believers, which is so familiar to me. And, I was wondering if they hear the confession of Christians, what do they think? Can they embrace that we are sinners? This is because some people may feel bad or unethical when they hear that you are sinners. It becomes even more difficult to explain to them the confession that we are sinners if they are those who try to keep the laws and the rules of the world as much as possible. Anyway, confession is not an easy topic to explain to children.

But I found a hint to explain the concept of confession during the past Wednesday Lent service. The gospel reading of the service was Matthew 6:5-14, which is about the Lord’s Prayer. The Lord’s Prayer we are used to tells “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” The word trespass means sin or fault. In the New Revised Standard Version, it tells that “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” The word trespass was changed to debt. The word trespass is a translation of οφειλημα of Greek language, which means debt. And, the word forgive is a translation of ἀφήμι of Greek, which means write off or forgive. The two Greek words are generally used as forgive a debt or write off a debt than forgive a sin. Therefore, the word

trespass can be changed to debt, and the NRSV tells that “Forgive us our debts.”

The deep relationship between sin and debt also appears in Matthew 18. In the chapter, Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” (21) Jesus uses the parable of an unforgiving servant, which describes one who owed ten thousand talents and his fellow slaves who owed a hundred denarii. I believe you remember this story.

If we replace the word sin with the word debt, it will be easier to explain and understand the confession to us today. We are living in a capitalistic society. In this society, the important values are money and abilities to make money. This society treats people according to their abilities. If this was a class society with classes of kings, nobles, commoners, and slaves, capitalism and capabilityism that could change classes with their own abilities might have been good news for them.

But, capitalism makes the rich-get-richer and the poor-get-poorer cycle and unlimited competition. We know the contradictions that capitalist society has and we have already felt that. I don't want to deny the benefits of moderate competition but the problem is that endless competition is occurring. As they are treated according to their abilities, they do not appreciate the treatment they receive and take it for granted because their ability brought the treatment. The world dominated by capitalism is a world that loses gratitude, namely dystopia.

By the way, we, Christians, confess that we are sinners. As I said earlier, the word sin can be replaced with debt. In general, debt means borrowing money from others because they can't purchase immediately. In American society, of course, people sometimes intentionally owe money on things like cars to increase their credit scores. In general, however, debt refers to borrowing money from others due to lack of ability. Anyway, people can pay back the debt to the person who borrowed it within a certain amount of time.

However, there are debts in the world that cannot be paid. For example, you all owe your parents. My son will soon be 1 year old. In the meantime, Esther and I have helped my child with everything in his life, including feeding, washing, cleaning up poop and urine, and putting him to sleep, and so on. Through this process, I realized that I have a debt that I can't pay back to my parents. And, we have a debt to the society we live in.

This is a debt that I can't pay back with money. And we have a debt to the society we live in because it provides us with schools, hospitals, and electricity, water supply, roads, and systems. Recently, I got the first vaccine of COVID-19 for free. Many people's efforts and money would have been invested in making the vaccine, but the society provided people the vaccine for free. As such, we have a debt to the society.

Some people may think that they buy what society provides them with their money, such as the food and clothes they eat, but they should remember that they can't fully compensate for the time and effort the providers put into making. From the moment we realize that we have a debt to the society, we become to have social sense of community. So, when there are those in need in the same community, we have a mind to help them.

And, we have a debt to nature and the ecosystem as well as to parents and society. Nature freely provides us with things we need such as oxygen, water, trees, mountains, sheep, goats, chickens, sun, and grass. We have used nature for free and we have a debt to the natural environment.

Ultimately, we have a debt to God who created everything. We are ignorant, lacking, and incomplete, but God has given us nature, society, and family. It is grace, mercy, and love that God has given us for free. What we can do is realize that we have a debt and thank God for giving us them.

When we read the scripture reading for today, man of the Israelites died as snakes bit them. They couldn't save themselves from the desperate situation. So, they asked Moses to pray to God. When Moses prayed for the people, the Lord said, "Make a poisonous snake and place it on a pole. Whoever is bitten can look at it and live." So whoever was bitten by snakes could look at the bronze snake and live.

John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life" is a very famous verse. As the Bible tells, God sent Jesus as a savior to the earth because He so loved the world and because humans cannot save themselves. So, we have a debt to God and Jesus Christ.

Beloved, the word sinner means those who have a debt to God. Just as God forgave our ten thousand talents' debts through Jesus Christ, I pray that we will also forgive other's a hundred denariis' debts in our lives. Amen.