

June 15, 2011

“The Price of Freedom and Forgiveness”
(Luke 7:36-47)

I’m skipping the Lectionary assignment for this week because the month of June holds many important dates in my life as an American citizen.

June 14, 1775 is the birthday of the United States Army. On the same date two years later was our first Flag Day. On June 12, 1898, (Pista Sai Nayon) the Philippines were freed from the Spanish rule only to endure many more years of foreign rule until she received her independence from the United States. On June 6, 1944, the Allied Forces stormed onto the Normandy beaches to free Europe from the Axis powers. Though not widely reported by the media, American, British, Canadian and French leaders visited the shores of Omaha Beach in Normandy where thousands of servicemen gave their lives on the D-day invasion that led to the eventual liberation of Europe from the Axis powers. Having served my country for 36 years in the United States Army, you can understand why these dates are so meaningful to me.

On November 19, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln stood on the battlefield of Gettysburg to dedicate a portion of that land as a national cemetery. The featured speaker of the day was Edward Everett, acclaimed as possibly the greatest classical orator of his time. A former United States senator, Governor of Massachusetts and President of Harvard University, he spoke for more than two hours to an audience of some 25,000 people. His was a masterful address, broad in its scope and dramatic in its presentation.

Next was a musical interlude by the Baltimore Glee Club and then, finally, President Lincoln. Lincoln was formally introduced and the people settled back down in their chairs and on the grass to listen to him. Lincoln spoke simply and clearly and startled the

June 15, 2011

people by the briefness of his remarks. Now, I realize that most of you are already familiar with what he said, but would you listen again to a portion of it? After his opening sentence, he said:

“We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

“But in a larger sense we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

“It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Gettysburg does not stand alone in our memory. I would run out of time were I to detail scenes of carnage and courage in places as Valley Forge, Flanders Field, Omaha Beach, Iwo Jima, Pork Chop Hill, the Mekong, and for the past ten years operations throughout Iraq and Afghanistan.

But friends, we must realize that if freedom is to be carried on from generation to generation – if our children and grandchildren are to enjoy freedom – then we must be willing to pay the price,

June 15, 2011

because “freedom is never free.” “Freedom is never free.” It sounds like a paradox when you say it, but it is true. “Freedom is never free.”

In the same way, “forgiveness is never free.” That, too, sounds untrue at first. But before forgiveness takes place there is always a price to be paid. Let me call your attention to the Scripture reading of a few minutes ago. This incident and the parable that Jesus shares in it are of particular importance

Jesus had been invited to the home of a Pharisee by the name of Simon. That is something quite unusual because the Pharisees saw Jesus as a threat to their power, their teachings and their legalistic system. They saw Jesus as their enemy, not all of them, of course, but most of them. But this Pharisee invited Jesus to his home. We’re not exactly sure why he invited Him but most commentators believe he invited Jesus because he wanted to upstage Him. And Jesus accepted the invitation.

It was normal, when a guest arrived, to make him feel welcome by going through certain common courtesies.

First of all, his feet would be washed. A guest’s feet would be caked with dirt after walking in sandals on the dusty roads. So a servant would greet him at the door with a basin of water and would wash and dry his feet. After his feet had been cleaned, the host would come and greet him with a kiss to make him feel welcome and let him know that he was an honored guest.

Then it was a matter of courtesy to anoint the head of the guest with some cooling oil. Maybe it is because of the hot oriental sun. Maybe some of the men were thin on top and slightly sunburned. Whatever the reason, it was customary to use oil to anoint the head of a guest. All these things went together to say, “You are

June 15, 2011

welcome to our home.” But when Jesus visited the home of this Pharisee, none of these things happened.

Now, as they began eating, an unusual thing happened. This woman – Luke calls her a sinner (the word means “an immoral woman, a prostitute”) came to where they were eating – probably an outdoor courtyard to catch the evening breeze. She stood behind Jesus at his feet weeping. Her tears fell on his feet so she dried them with her hair. Then she broke a vial of expensive perfume and anointed his feet and began kissing them.

All the while, Simon the Pharisee was watching. He was greatly offended and embarrassed by what was going on. Because all the things he failed to do as a host she was doing. Simon knew what kind of woman she was, so as he judges her, he is also judging Jesus. He is thinking to himself, “If this man is truly a prophet, he would surely know that she is an immoral woman.” Simon saw her as a prostitute but Jesus saw her as a child of God who needed forgiveness.

Then Jesus told this parable about the two men who owed money to a money lender. I won't try to translate how much a denarii is suffice to say that a denarii represented a days wages at that time. One fellow owed the equivalent of 50 days wages and the other 500 days. Assuming a five day work week, one owes ten weeks and the other 100 weeks or almost two years.

So Jesus says to Simon, “Simon, since neither can repay their debt and the money lender says to these two men, ‘Tell you what, fellows, I'll stamp your bill paid in full and you won't owe me anything,’ which one would be the most grateful?” Simon was caught between a rock and a hard spot. He thinks to himself, I may admit that I am a sinner, but not to the same degree as that woman. Jesus is making me out as the fellow who owes the 50 denarii's and she as the person owing the 500. So he answers, “It would be

June 15, 2011

the one who owes the most who would be most thankful.” Jesus said, “You have answered correctly,” and leaves it there for the time being.

He turns to the women and reminds her that her sins have been forgiven. He tells Simon that those who have been forgiven much love much and those who have been forgiven little love little.

How does this tie into “Freedom” and “Forgiveness” you may ask?

Every one is a spiritual debtor – you and I are in debt to society, to our nation and to God. We are all debtors. You may not have thought of it in this way, but face it, all of us are debtors.

Now, an important asset when you are in debt is a good memory. Because if you don’t remember to whom you owe money, you’re going to have all kinds of problems. Simon’s problem was that he had a poor memory.

I suspect when Simon looked at himself he thought, “God, you’re lucky to have me on your team. I’m pretty special. I’ve memorized the law! I pray beautiful prayers! And I do so many significant things for you! I’m a Pharisee and I’ve mastered the art of being a Pharisee. God, I’m a pretty special guy.”

What Simon forgot was that he was a sinner. His sins were sins of the heart and he didn’t recognize them as sins. It was easy for him to forget that he stood in the need of forgiveness.

And isn’t it so easy for us to forget how indebted we are to those who paid the price to achieve freedom for us? Isn’t it easy for us to get in our cars and drive from place to place without even thinking about the blessings of the freedom we enjoy?

June 15, 2011

Isn't it easy for us to come into God's house and open our Bibles and never give it a second thought. Isn't it easy for us to forget those pilgrim forefathers who crossed the ocean to this new land? Isn't it easy to forget the blood that was shed at Valley Forge and at Gettysburg?

We put hamburgers on the grill and sit around enjoying all the material blessings that God has given us and forget the blood that was shed so that the stars and stripes could fly in the breeze and so we could still enjoy the freedom that is ours as citizens of the United States of America.

We owe a great debt to our country and to those who have gone before. We also owe a great debt to our God who has redeemed and forgiven us. We are all debtors. We all owe a debt. We can never repay that debt.

Our nation's fiscal situation is a good example of what I said. General Motors, Chrysler, AIG, Bank of America, Citicorp and all the other corporate "money managers" found that they owed more than they were able to pay and the Federal government had to bail them out. Our citizens who learned to live by the credit cards soon found themselves in the same situation. By making minimum payments, they were getting deeper and deeper in debt. The federal government faces the situation by printing more paper money and selling them as "IOUs". In so doing, the United States faces the same dilemma should all its creditors decide to collect what is owed them all at once. All of these debtors, be it the government, the corporations or John Q. Public, have remained solvent so long as the creditors don't demand everything at the same time.

When I think of the debt of freedom that I owe to our forefathers, I realize **that** is also a debt I can't pay. And when I think of the debt

June 15, 2011

I owe God for the price He has paid for my sins, I realize that I can't pay that either.

Now getting g back to the story: When she wet Jesus feet with her tears and tried to dry them with her hair, and anointed Him with the oil, it was an expression of gratitude and love. Though you and I may think that was the way to pay God back, she wasn't paying Him back. She was saying, "Thank you Lord. Thank you for forgiving my sins."

And that's all you and I can do. We can never pay God back. But we can show our gratitude and love by rolling up our sleeves and go to work. We can worship and we can serve and we can cry a little bit and we can pray a bunch. And we can get out and reach people for Jesus. We can do all that, but we will never be able to pay the debt that we owe our God.

However, forgiveness is available to everyone. Though we can't pay it, forgiveness is not free. In the instance of the money lender, it cost him 550 dinarii to forgive the debts. A pittance compared to the forgiveness of God, but it is a teaching parable. When God forgives, the forgiveness cost God through the cross. The ledger had to be stamped "Paid in Full" before forgiveness became a reality. Now that it's been paid, it's available to all.

Isn't that also true of our freedom? The price has been paid. It is available to all in this great land. That is why we rejoice at the Declaration of Independence. That is why we rejoice in the Statue of Liberty. Freedom is available to all of us, regardless of where we live in this great nation.

Let me close with a story that I've told many times. One day, Abraham Lincoln went to a slave auction and noticed a young Negro girl who was about to be auctioned off. So he began

June 15, 2011

bidding and eventually purchased her. They brought her over to him and he instructed them to take the shackles off her wrists and ankles. Then he said to her, "You are free to go."

She looked at him and said, "You mean that I don't have to go home with you?" He said, "No, you don't." She said, "You mean that I don't have to do what you say?" "That's right." "You mean I don't have to be your slave, I don't have to put up with your whims and your fancies?" He said, "No, you don't. You are free to go." She bowed her head and tears started flowing down her cheeks. She looked up at Abraham Lincoln and said, "Then I guess I'll go with you."

Freedom is never free. It always costs someone something. Forgiveness is never free. There is always a price that must be paid.

Right now we need to remember the price and to thank God for our freedom and for our forgiveness. And we need to dedicate ourselves to keep on paying the price so that freedom and forgiveness might be enjoyed for generations to come.

Glory be to God! Amen.

References: Adapted "Freedom & Forgiveness Are Never Free," Melvin Newland; "The Gospel of Luke, Rev. Ed.," William Barclay; "Commentary on the Gospel of Luke," Norval Geldenhuys; "Luke, The Abington Bible Commentary," J.A. Findlay; also 060210.