**Redemption, Liberation, Jubilee**

**Co-pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**

**Nutana Park Mennonite Church**

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**Scripture: Leviticus 25:8-17, 25-28, 35-42; Luke 4:16-21**

We live in a debt-laden culture. You don’t need to look far to learn that more Canadians are in more debt than ever before. Listen to a few recent headlines: “Canada’s Debt to Income Ratio Sets New Record High at 165%” (CBC News),[[1]](#footnote-1) “More than half of Canadians say they aren’t financially prepared if interest rates jump, expenses rise: survey” (*Financial Post*),[[2]](#footnote-2) and the most recent issue of *The Walrus* magazine: “Maxed Out: Why We’re Living Beyond Our Means.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Now I’m no financial guru, but even from these few examples, it’s clear that as Canadians, we’re spending much more than we’re earning. Only 14% of millennials – people my age and a bit younger – are debt-free, due to massive student loans, high mortgages, credit cards, difficulty finding salaried work, and so on. It doesn’t take long for debt to become a burden, even an unmanageable one, which is where payday loan and credit card companies step in to profit from financial hardships. And the unsustainability of such an arrangement should make us uneasy, at the very least.

Now you might be wondering – what does debt have to do with salvation? Why am I starting my sermon on such a mundane, worldly note? Well, it turns out debt is not just a number to us. We actually ascribe cultural weight to it. As one teacher wrote about her difficult experience of unemployment: “We live in this system that correlates wealth with character. . . If you are doing well financially, you must be a good person. And if you are doing poorly, you must be a bad person. What an unjust narrative that is.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Canadian author Margaret Atwood takes this one step further in her book *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, speaking of the religious or spiritual connotations of debt in our Western cultural imagination. With her typical deadpan humour, she writes,

We seem to be entering a period in which debt has passed through its most recent harmless and fashionable period, and is reverting to being sinful. There are even debt TV shows, which have a familiar religious-revival ring to them. There are accounts of shopaholic binges during which you don’t know what came over you and everything was a blur, with tearful confessions by those who’ve spent themselves into quivering insomniac jellies of hopeless indebtedness, and have resorted to lying, cheating, stealing, and kiting cheques between bank accounts as a result. There are testimonials by families and loved ones whose lives have been destroyed by the debtor’s harmful behaviour. There are compassionate but severe admonitions by the television host, who here plays the part of priest or revivalist. There’s a moment of seeing the light, followed by repentance and a promise never to do it again. There’s a penance imposed – *snip, snip* go the scissors on the credit cards – followed by a strict curb-on-spending regimen; and finally, if all goes well, the debts are paid down, the sins are forgiven, absolution is granted, and a new day dawns, in which a sadder but more solvent man you rise the morrow morn.[[5]](#footnote-5)

And I think Atwood is right: whether consciously or not, we do link finances and faith. And if we don’t, I think we should. Just not in the usual, individualistic, prosperity-gospel kind of way.

Our Scripture passage from Leviticus 25 for today highlights an economic word that we already use as a synonym for salvation: the term redemption. We have vestiges of this economic sense of the word when we talk about “redeeming” a coupon or points for something.[[6]](#footnote-6) (In Winnipeg, there’s also a thrift store called “Redeemed,” which is a fitting name!) In the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament especially, redemption had a very concrete, economic meaning related to slavery, debt, and the land. From these selections from Lev. 25, we catch a glimpse of what debt meant in the ancient Israelite context, what one’s options were in that society if one went into debt. One option was to sell one’s ancestral land, which would leave one without a stable source of income or space to raise livestock in an agrarian society. Another was to rely on one’s relatives to support one financially (and we can imagine how happy an arrangement that must have been, as it is today…). As a last resort, one might sell one’s family members or oneself into slavery, to work as labourers for other farmers and landowners “as security for a loan”[[7]](#footnote-7) – a practice which most likely split up the family. Needless to say, this option carried a lot of shame with it, as poverty does in most societies.

When people fell into these problems with debt in ancient Israel, what they needed was to be redeemed - to be saved from their poverty and from slavery. This is what Job is longing for when he asserts from the depths of his grief, “I know that my Redeemer lives!” (Job 19:25). This is also what Ruth and Naomi request of Boaz when they ask him to act as “next-of-kin” which means, “one with the right to redeem.” He agrees to marry Ruth and provide for them and thus redeems them from impoverished widowhood (Ruth 3 and 4).

But what is so interesting about the Year of Jubilee – which was to happen every 50 years – is that it addressed each of these arrangements, releasing people from their debts and redeeming families and the land itself. In Leviticus 25, we read, “”you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family” (Lev. 25:10). So those who were forced to sell their land will have property again. We also read, “If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them. . . Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them” (v. 35-36). So those forced to rely financially upon relatives are provided for and not taken advantage of. And finally, “If any who are dependent on you becomes so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as hired or bound laborers. They shall serve with you until the year of jubilee. Then they and their children with them shall be free from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property. For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold” (v. 39-42).

These guidelines suggest very clearly that in ancient Israelite society, debt or poverty was not supposed to be a permanent fate. Debt was not permitted to get out of hand, to persist as a cycle for generation upon generation, because every 50 years, about once in each generation, debts were to be forgiven, lands returned, slaves released, and the land allowed to rest. In other words, once every fifty years, the economy was to be reset and people’s economic status to be equalized, so everyone could start again. Those who were deep in debt did not have that hanging over them and their children and grandchildren, and those who had amassed much land and wealth and servants were to release it and give back to others.

Isn’t this a beautiful vision of economic equality? The Year of Jubilee would ensure a regular redistribution of resources so that everyone had enough. It’s like the prophet Micah’s vision that the nations would no longer learn war and everyone would sit under their own vines and fig trees, and no one would be afraid (Micah 4:3-4). No wonder the term jubilee has become synonymous with grand celebrations. This certainly would be something worth blowing the trumpet for!

It’s striking, too, that the land itself is part of the Jubilee. We’re told that the land is allowed to rest in the 50th year: “you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces” (Lev. 25:11-12). According to biblical scholar Sharon Ringe, the reason for allowing the fields to lie fallow was an extension of the “humanitarian” impulse in the rest of the Jubilee laws, since “those who do not own land are allowed to harvest crops produced spontaneously by it in the years when it is not cultivated.”[[8]](#footnote-8) But I think it goes one step further than this as well: the jubilee practice of letting the land lie fallow suggests to me an act of mercy toward the land itself – as with people, the land itself is not to be enslaved, but is to be permitted its rest as well because it belongs to God.

And this really is key to the entire notion of Jubilee: the land is to be returned and to rest because it belongs to God; people are not to be mistreated or enslaved indefinitely because they belong to God. The Isrealites are to follow the Jubilee to redeem the land and each other because God first redeemed and liberated them from slavery in Egypt. Let’s not forget that the Jubilee is found within a book of the Law or Torah. These are part of what Ringe calls “the ethical consequences of being the people of God.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The Jubilee laws are not about any human kingdom, but rather come from a merciful, loving God who is Creator of the land and Redeemer of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. In other words, the Jubilee laws are a way of re-enacting the exodus, and of living out the claim that they are the people of the God who liberates slaves, gives everyone a home, and ensures the land is not mistreated. In Ringe’s words, a relationship with God “includes caring for the poor and granting freedom to those trapped in a continuing cycle of indebtedness. [A relationship with God] is presented as a fact bearing on people’s daily life and structuring their relationships with one another and with the rest of the created order.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Now you might be thinking, this is nice and all, but isn’t it just some quirky idea that I dug up from the depths of Leviticus? Isn’t that the biblical book which also warns us of the dangers of eating shellfish and mixing different kinds of cloth, not to mention its serious prejudices against people based on gender and sexual orientation? In a sense, that trepidation is well-founded. The Jubilee is nestled among a whole bunch of rules and regulations and taboos which we no longer follow or consider authoritative. But the difference is that the Jubilee laws – like the calls to love the stranger as oneself, which are also found in Leviticus! – are taken up by Jesus and shape his teaching and ministry in a major way.

In addition to various parables concerning debt, forgiveness, labourers, slaves, and masters (e.g., Luke 16:1-8, Matt. 25:14-28, Matt. 20:1-15, Luke 7:40-50, Matt. 18:21-35, etc.) the Gospel of Luke portrays Jesus starting off his ministry by essentially announcing the Jubilee! As we heard read this morning, Jesus goes into the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth and unrolls the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. There, he reads,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
    because he has anointed me  
        to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
    and recovery of sight to the blind,  
        to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

And then he claims, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (v. 21).

So in Luke, Jesus begins his ministry with Jubilee language of liberation from oppression and good news, proclaiming the year of God’s favour – another term for the year of Jubilee. Sharon Ringe calls this a portrayal of “Jesus as the herald of liberation,” and “the clearest reference” to the Jubilee in the three Synoptic Gospels. Jesus here makes an “announcement of God’s reign, … [a] proclamation of good news to the poor, and [a] declaration of ‘release’ from captivity to various forms of imprisonment and enslavement.”[[11]](#footnote-11) And this resonates with the rest of his ministry as well, including, perhaps most notably, the Lord’s prayer (Matt. 6).

There is a translation of the Lord’s prayer which ties it much more closely to the Jubilee. Here at Nutana Park, we’re used to praying, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” but the word for “trespasses” can also be translated as “debts” – so that line could just as well read, “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Now we might argue that these are spiritual debts or sins, not actual monetary debts. But given how Jesus talks about money, and how the Jubilee makes property and financial practices and our relationships to other people and the land central to faithfulness, why couldn’t it mean both? Maybe Jesus is inviting us to forgive actual debts as well as spiritual debts,[[12]](#footnote-12) and thus to live out the Jubilee.

So what would this look like today? What might the Jubilee mean in our time and place, in our debt-laden, capitalist culture? Well, we might imagine, as Atwood does, one’s credit card company calling and saying “we’re going to write off that debt” or “the bank is going to forgive your home mortgage,… or your student loan debts, … or you’re business debt … we’re going to forgive it.” Imagine – we wouldn’t be able to believe it! We’d think it was a mistake, that it wasn’t even legal! But we would also experience deep relief and joy at being released from that burden, “because debt really is a form of slavery.”[[13]](#footnote-13) But this is hardly realistic. The credit card and payday loan companies aren’t going to start forgiving loans, because that’s not how our system works, and it would leave them out of a job. They’re not about to self-destruct, not when things are this profitable. And perhaps that’s why we haven’t been able to find any conclusive evidence that the Jubilee was ever actually practiced among the ancient Israelites.[[14]](#footnote-14) Perhaps it was just deemed too radical – at least by the well-off, those with the most to lose.

But I would say that there is evidence of Jubilee action in our world today. For instance, there is a multi-faith group in the UK called the Jubilee Debt Campaign, which calls on the wealthiest governments in the world to forgive the debt of the world’s poorest developing nations. (Incidentally, Stuart Murray Williams, chair of the Anabaptist Network there and author of *The Naked Anabaptist*, has signed on as a supporter).[[15]](#footnote-15) The Fair Trade movement is also a commitment to refuse to enslave labourers, to make sure they are paid fair, living wages for their work making our food and goods. Working for creation care or with sustainable practices likewise puts into action the Jubilee calls to honour the land itself. And in our context of Indigenous-settler relationships and a colonial history, there is also the example of the Albertan Mennonite farmer who decides to give a section of his land (worth about $3 million) to the Siksika First Nation – to the horror of his children (from Steven Ratzlaff’s play, *Reservations*, quoted in the most recent *Canadian Mennonite*).[[16]](#footnote-16) That is perhaps the most challenging example, calling us to think about the hard questions raised for us as treaty 6 people by the Jubilee idea of returning ancestral lands.

Of course, there is also another example of Jubilee economics, which we just participated in together this morning: namely, the alternative economics of church. Isn’t it counter-cultural in our individualistic context to pool our resources and decide together, as a community, what nonprofits to support? Isn’t it a Jubilee-worthy act of economic redistribution to give up our week and weekend raising money through a massive yard sale to support Mennonite Central Committee as it helps refugees? And aren’t we teaching our children these Jubilee values as we mentor them into giving through the My Coins Count offering, and learn from their eagerness and joy as they hear the clink of the coins falling into the buckets? I would suggest that in these ways, we’re already practicing the Jubilee right here, today. It turns out we don’t have to wait until the fiftieth year to perform these acts of economic redistribution as a faith community. May we continue to celebrate the Jubilee in these small but powerful ways, practicing mercy in the image of our merciful God. Amen.

1. http://www.cbc.ca/news/business/debt-income-1.3486811 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.msn.com/en-ca/money/forwardbanking/more-than-half-of-canadians-say-they-aren%e2%80%99t-financially-prepared-if-interest-rates-jump-expenses-rise-survey/ar-BBBrb5U?OCID=ems.display.welcomeexperience [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://thewalrus.ca/canadas-middle-class-is-on-the-brink-of-ruin/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/19/your-money/budget-what-you-can-afford.html?\_r=0 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Margaret Atwood, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth,* CBC Massey Lectures (Toronto: Anansi, 2008), 41-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Atwood, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ringe, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ringe, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ringe, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ringe, 35-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Atwood, 45-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Atwood, 46-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ringe, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <http://multifaith.jubileedebt.org.uk/2013/03/over-400-faith-leaders-demand-jubilee-for-justice/> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <http://www.canadianmennonite.org/stories/land-heart-matter> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)