

## Experiencing the Trinity

### Romans 8:12-17

“So then brothers, we are debtors....”

#### Introduction:

America is in debt. According to the Washington Post last week, one impact of the new federal budget is that each of our children has just been handed \$12,000 dollars of new debt. That is a lot of debt for a toddler.

Financial advisors sometimes distinguish between good and bad debt. A mortgage is good debt; a balance on your Macy's card is bad debt. A student loan is good debt; a car loan is bad debt.

But not all agree. Dave Ramsey recently said this:

*I've looked at people who've built wealth. By and large, they stay away from debt. They don't discuss good debt. Only financial planners discuss good debt. And as a matter of fact, when the Forbes 400, the wealthiest 400 people in America, were surveyed, 75 percent of them said the best way to build wealth is get out of debt and stay out of debt.*

The apostle Paul suggests there is such a thing as good debt. The Holy Spirit is mentioned 30 times in Romans. 19 of those are in Chapter 8. In Romans 8 he explains that in the realm of the Holy Spirit, where all of us get drawn up into the saving activity of the Father and Son, we become debtors. He tells us “we are debtors but not to the flesh.”

To be a debtor to the flesh is to be a slave to the pattern of thinking that is outside of the mind of Christ. The flesh is simply anyone or anything that is not being disciplined by Jesus. And if you are not a disciple you are lost. So being indebted to the flesh is bad debt.

But dependence on the Spirit is good debt. Being a disciple is good debt. We who follow Christ are debtors. But to whom? Well we are debtors to God who saves us and all other Christians, past and present, who have made that salvation known to us. Christ and his saints are our “lenders” our “patrons.”

So how do we deal with good debt? Do we....

#### Pay it Off?

To pay off debt means you want to eliminate it. You want to change your status from that of a debtor to one who is not beholden.

Financially, this is a good strategy if you believe wealth can only be measured in terms of a lack of debt. And indeed many American consumers would do well to reduce the amount of their commercial debt. But in the realm of the Spirit, can this be done? Is it possible to pay back God and his Saints for what they have given us. Actually our spiritual debt is so great, incalculable really, that it is hubris to think we can pay it off.

Specifically, can we pay off the debt we owe those who had the foresight to build this building fifty years ago? Can we pay off the debt to Raymond Davis for his courage in welcoming the Holy Spirit and the messiness that created in a staid and proper Virginian Episcopal Church? I am sure it cost him. Can we pay off our debt to John Howe for his faithful biblical teaching, teaching that grounded the movement of

the Spirit into a biblical faith? Can we pay off Martyn Minn's leadership in creating an awareness of the poor AND the Church's calling to meet the Lord in their midst? Well, can we?

Paying off such a debt implies we are debtors only to those who go before us. Paul tells we are not debtors to the flesh but to the Spirit and the Spirit is always before us. So we are also debtors to those who follow us – our children and grandchildren, to people who do not yet know Christ. Future generations will judge our stewardship.

I have a hearty belief in the doctrine of prevenient grace. Prevenient grace is the activity of God who always goes before us in mission. It is the “down field blocking” of the Spirit. Prevenient grace is the teaching that in mission and ministry, we are never first. God is already there when we show up. Thus, our primary job is to pay attention to where God is at work and join Him in that work. We have the job of being “2<sup>nd</sup> witnesses.” The Holy Spirit is always “the first witness.” But how the Spirit comes to us, to alert us to His intentions is not always as clear as we might like, and sometimes he comes in unexpected ways.

When Truro still worshipped in the chapel, with chairs in the aisles, one Sunday Mrs. Capen, walking with her cane, discovered a visitor sitting in her pew. She tapped the pew to have the person move over, but the pew was full and he could not. This infuriated Mrs. Capen. She spoke to an usher who had to direct her to an empty place on the front row. She glared at the Rector through the entire service. On the way out she announced to Raymond Davis, **“I would rather find a strange man in my bed than in my pew.”**

Mrs. Capen was a catalyst for this building. The Spirit uses all kinds of instruments to convey his activity to us. So if we cannot pay it off, can we.....

### **Pass it on?**

Passing it on means I make no effort to repay what I owe because I know I can't. Instead I give my obligation to pay to someone else. I want someone else to pay off the debt I have incurred, and while I am at it I might as well add a few thousand dollars to it.

This appears to be what the most recent Federal Budget has done. The Washington Post described it as “\$12,000 worth of new debt per person.” We are simply running up the tab for later generations to pay. The bumper sticker “I am spending my children's inheritance” is no longer true. We are spending their livelihood.

What about the realm of the Spirit? Are we giving our children an inheritance or a debt they cannot pay? Before a mission or action is undertaken we should ask: “Will this make it more possible or less possible for our children to grow in the faith and bring their contemporaries to faith.” Our disobedience or laziness has consequences. If we are hesitant to build an evangelistic outreach to our community it has real consequences for the next generation. Our lack of obedience to the Spirit, means we are passing on bad debt.

However, when we do step out in faith, and build beyond our own needs or wants, we are passing on good debt. 50 years ago our parents in the faith at Truro, built this new church building. They built it in 1959 and paid it off by 1974. But in the 70's they began to acquire another debt: the charismatic movement of the Holy Spirit came through Truro and began to make people's faith come alive. Good, orthodox, Episcopalian Christians became fully Trinitarian Christians. Most mainline Christians are functionally binitarian – they worship Father and Son, and give a head-fake to the Spirit.

Because of the people we are honoring this week, those who laid the foundation we have inherited, we do not give a head-fake to the Spirit. We make room in our hearts, and in our midst. Every Sunday we gather together and say “Almighty God to you all hearts are open, all desires known and from You no secrets are hid. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of ... WHAT? YOUR HOLY SPIRIT. So that what? ... We might perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy Name. No head fake at Truro on this prayer.

I want to say a word of thanks to my immediate predecessors at Truro for their willingness to listen to the Spirit: Raymond Davis, John Howe and Martyn Minns. They all listened and sought to obey the Spirit. I am their debtor and you are their debtors. But, again, how do acknowledge this debt? Do we merely repeat what they did? That would be another way of passing it on. But passing it on, fails to recognize that this decade is NOT the 70s, 80s, 90s. We live in a new century and a new millennium. The children of today have different challenges. The seekers of today have different questions. They don't question the existence of eternal life. They don't care. They are looking for life now in the midst of death. So the question we must ask is “What is the Spirit doing NOW.” We cannot simply repeat what worked in the 70, 80, 90s, because the current decade poses new challenges and demands new answers. To blindly repeat old patterns is irresponsible because it converts good debt into bad debt. It turns an inheritance of the Spirit into a debt of the flesh, a debt none of our children and grand children deserve.

If passing it on is the wrong approach to our spiritual inheritance, then maybe –

### **Pay it Forward?**

Paying a debt forward works like this: Let's say I owe you \$100 and I come, cash in hand, to pay you back. But instead of receiving my repayment, you tell me to give it to someone else. My obligation is to you, but you tell me to fulfill that obligation by benefiting someone else. That is paying it forward.

Is this not the way to pay back spiritual debt? We must equip the next generation to be the kind of Christians that can evangelize NOVA and be the world-Christians the new generation needs. What kind will that be? Christians are to be salt and light in every generation. But each generation needs light and salt applied to different parts of society. We have a great legacy of sending out missionaries from Truro. But God is raising up two new kinds of missionaries at Truro: Missionaries to marriage and missionaries to the poor and homeless. These are domestic missionaries.

Interestingly, we see our young people being recruited to both areas.

As a work of the Spirit who goes before us, let me describe two important signs that I see.

We just completed the largest Marriage and Alpha courses in the history of Truro. But more importantly, the Alpha course in particular is not filled with people already at Truro. We are now reaching people outside of our membership and even outside of Christianity. Along with this work, is a new growing young adult group, a group that Truro historically has not had. Three members of that group will be with me in mission in India in late June.

Melissa Ciaverella is developing a wonderful team of ministers to work with our youth and families and we plan to have a new youth pastor in place this summer to fill that need in Melissa team. I am very grateful for Melissa's hard work and skillful leadership and for the parish's patience with us during this transition. We are continuing to build a team of 2nd witnesses who are equipped to see the Spirit at work and to lead us in joining the Spirit. **This is the way to experience the Trinity, getting caught up in the Spirit's activity of bringing people into the eternal love of Father and Son.**

This leads me to the second sign I see. Last year when our visioning community was concluding that the Lord was calling us into a deeper imitation of Jesus' radical hospitality, Munny and Betty Yates came to me to see if Truro would host Love the World Fellowship, the homeless congregation that had outgrown their home in Annandale. I took the request before the vestry, and we discerned that the Lord was asking us to put our money where our mouth is. We read this as confirmation indeed that we were to be a parish of **intentional radical hospitality**. But we are still learning to do it. Since Truro has partnered with LTWF, we have 50 members of the parish volunteering on a regular basis, 10 of whom are teenagers. Those teenagers are my heroes at Truro. I want all of you to know that I am going to put the full weight of my office into building into their lives. I also want Truro to know how much I love and admire Munny and Betty Yates and my commitment to their work. But that commitment arises from the fact that I see the Holy Spirit going before us. We don't have a ministry. We can only share in Jesus' ministry through the Spirit.

The Spirit of God is still at work in Truro. But the Spirit's work is fresh and new, and unlike any other that we have experienced at Truro. I can't claim to understand that work in its entirety, but I see it. I don't see all of it nor do I see all of it clearly yet. Discerning the Spirit's work requires a community of discernment and discipline. I must say that without our Executive Director, my staff, and our vestry, all of whom are on a journey of hospitality toward one another and a deeper commitment toward shared leadership, this discernment and obedience to the Spirit would be much more difficult, if not impossible. So I want to thank these sisters and brothers for helping me lead Truro.

## **Conclusion**

I want to conclude with another story about Mrs. Capen. As the building was nearing completion, she asked Ed Pritchard to secure a memorial pew for her. Ed said that doesn't sound right but I will ask the Rector. Raymond said if Mrs. Capen wanted to give a memorial pew to herself, then that was okay. Mrs. Capen sent out invitations asking others to donate for her own memorial pew. The money came. The largest gift memorial gift came from Senator Rust. Once all \$250 arrived, Ed notified Mrs. Capen. Then she instructed Ed to put a memorial plaque on the pew "To the Glory of God and in memory of Daisy Welch Capen." Ed replied, "If I put that your pew, everyone will assume you are dead."

She said, "**I don't care what people say, I want to see it.**"

A few months later Ed had his last conversation with Mrs. Capen and she told him, when I die I want you to put that date of my death on that plaque you made me or I will come back to haunt you." Within a week of her death, Ed put the date of her death on the pew. It is there to this day.

Truro has made some fairly bold decisions in the last few years, at least as unimaginable as purchasing our own memorial pew. And we knew people would talk and we said, as a body, "We don't care what people say."

We, as a body, are trying to follow the will of the Lord in mission. We have our faces cast towards him, our ears cocked for his voice. We know we are debtors, not to the flesh, but to the Spirit. And we are saying, "Dear Lord, let us be good stewards of your vision and your work, as were those who gave us this building." And we have an inheritance of those who say, with intense determination, "**Yes, I still don't care what people say, I want to see it.**"