

Wis. 6:12-16; Rom. 5:1-11; Matt. 11:25-30  
Feast Day of Anselm of Canterbury

## Forgive Us Our Debts

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Today we celebrate the feast day of Anselm of Canterbury, the brilliant eleventh-century scholastic theologian. I was actually pretty excited when I found out that I was preaching on Anselm. I don't know if it's because of my Roman Catholic background, or my previous career as a tax lawyer, or the fact that I'm a theology nerd, but I totally have this thing for medieval scholasticism and the sheer beauty of its logic and theological arguments.

Not a lot of people know this, but I lusted after the 61-volume Latin and English edition of the *Summa Theologiae* published by Cambridge University Press. I own no less than eleven different Latin dictionaries and lexicons, including the hard-to-find *Lexicon Latinitatis Medii Aevi*. And I actually assign Anselm as a primary text in my "Sin, Grace, and Atonement" class. (Can you believe that? At EDS of all places. Call the *Living Church!*) So please don't tell my queer theology buddies in the academy about this – it might seriously tarnish my reputation as a postmodern thinker!

Anyway, my fetish for scholasticism aside, I think it's particularly fitting that today, as we approach the end of the EDS academic year – and Commencement in less than a month – we honor Anselm's passion for learning and his faith in human reason as a pathway to God.

Anselm certainly believed in the capacity of the human mind to obtain the "radiant and unfading" Holy Wisdom that we heard about in today's first reading. His ontological proof for the existence of God has fascinated and vexed theologians and philosophers of religion for nearly a thousand years.

And Anselm's maxim of *fides quaerens intellectum* – or "faith seeking reason" – still remains the classical definition of theology, which is reflected beautifully by our opening hymn, "Praise the Source of Faith and Learning."

But what Anselm is really known for – and reviled for, in some circles – is his satisfaction theory of the atonement. Anselm famously posed the question, *Cur Deus Homo*, or "Why did God become human?" Here's your Latin lesson for the day. *Cur*, meaning "why." *Deus*, meaning "God." And *Homo*, meaning "human." *Cur Deus*

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*Homo.* (Or, as the mischievous queer theologian in me likes to put it, “Why did God become a homo?”)

Well, Anselm’s answer was all about debt. That is, Jesus’ incarnation and crucifixion was necessary to satisfy the infinite debt that human beings owed God after the fall. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, had incurred a debt so large through their disobedience that no mere human being could ever satisfy it. So it took the life and death of a God-human – that is, Jesus Christ – in order to pay that price, or to wipe out the debt, if you will.

Anselm’s satisfaction theory of atonement later morphed into the bloody penal substitution model of the Reformation. That is, reformed theologians like John Calvin shifted the focus from debt to punishment, and argued that Jesus suffered the death penalty on our behalf so that we might be spared God’s wrath.

Like all theologies, Anselm’s satisfaction theory of atonement was contextual, and it was rooted in the language of lordship, feudalism, and serfdom from his day. Nevertheless, Anselm has been strongly criticized by many people – including feminist and queer theologians – for characterizing God as a ruthless debt collector and for making God subject to mechanical, unthinking notions of justice.

So as I prepared for today’s sermon, I thought a lot about whether anything might be salvaged from Anselm’s satisfaction theory of atonement. Although many of us may find the notion of a debt-collector God to be repugnant, I believe that the larger issue of debt – and the forgiveness of debt – is still highly relevant for us today, whether it’s our mortgages, car loans, credit card bills, student loans, or even our national deficit.

Now I can certainly appreciate the notion of being liberated from the bondage of debt. For me, the forgiveness of debt, drawing upon the imagery from today’s gospel, is much like replacing the heavy yoke of economic slavery or indentured servitude with a much lighter one. The yoke has become lighter because the “heavy burden” of the debt has been absorbed or shouldered by another.

As you know, I was a lawyer before I repented for my sins and became a theologian. My parents were first-generation immigrants without a lot of assets, and so I paid for law school myself by taking out loans. The reality of paying back loans and interest after graduation led me – as well as many of my classmates at Harvard Law School – to practice law on Wall Street. While that was lucrative on one level, it was soul-killing work on another.

Even more than economic debt, however, I have struggled with the burden of psychological debt. As the oldest son of a first-generation Asian American immigrant family, I have often wrestled with a notion of owing a debt to my parents that sometimes seems so large that it can never be repaid. For many Asian Americans, the sacrifice of our parents immigrating to the United States – as well as traditional cultural notions of

filial piety – results in a perceived debt that many of us spend our entire lives trying to repay.

This pervasive sense of economic and psychological debt made it incredibly hard for me to leave the practice of law and enter seminary, and later to become a theologian. Would I be honoring my parents? What would happen if they needed me to support them in their later years? What would my aunts and uncles and my parents' friends think? If anything, this has become harder – and not easier – in the last few years, as my dad has died, and my mom has grown older and increasingly faces health challenges and economic issues. Have I done the right thing? Did I make the right decision?

And this is why I find today's gospel so comforting. I am comforted precisely because I know that Jesus gives rest to those of us who are “weary” and who are “carrying heavy burdens” of economic as well as psychological debt. Like two creatures bound by a single yoke, Jesus shares in my burden, and his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Knowing this fact gives me permission to be gentle to myself. That is, all I can do is to follow my call to discipleship, and put aside any worries of not measuring up, or not living up to the impossible standards of the mythical “good Chinese son.”

It seems to me that most, if not all, of us have made pretty big sacrifices to be here at EDS and to follow our vocational calling. For some, it means choosing to be here instead of pursuing more lucrative financial opportunities. For others, it means moving and uprooting our lives and families, and dipping into our life savings. For still others, it means taking a huge leap of faith for God and our vocations. And, as wonderful as following one's call can be, these choices can still lead to anxieties in terms of wondering whether we've done as much as we can to repay others to whom we feel we're indebted.

So perhaps there is something, after all, that can be salvaged from Anselm's satisfaction theory of atonement. That is, atonement can be much more than just a divine spreadsheet that keeps track of the debts that we owe to God as the result of the sins of our very first parents. Atonement can also be thought of as including the satisfaction, or forgiveness, of our own economic as well as psychological debts.

It seems to me that, whenever we are freed from these external and internal debts, we become closer to God – that is, “at-one-ment” occurs. Jesus, in the words of today's gospel, is “gentle and humble in heart” and helps us to bear this burden as we follow our vocational calling. To me, that is truly a gift, and that is a matter of grace for which we should praise God. And that's true, regardless of whether or not we have a thing for medieval scholasticism!

+Amen.