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# Holy Interruptions

Deuteronomy 15:1-11

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, July 8, 2018,  
by the Rev. Dr. Carol Gregg

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Sometimes I am a little clueless. Even about the English language.

Recently, a friend of mine gave me a short lesson in the use of our language, particularly as it relates to youth slang. She asked, have you heard of “IDK” or “TBH”? “Uh... No?” I say. “It is text speak for “I don’t know” and “To be honest””. I didn’t know those words were so long that they needed to be shortened, but OK. “How about “Spill the tea” or “What’s the tea?””, she asked. I was, of course, clueless. Apparently, it means “Tell me the gossip”. According to the Urban Dictionary the phrase has been around for 10 years or more and references gossip being shared at tea parties.<sup>1</sup>

I tend to catch onto slang and clichés only when they become so mainstream, they are long past being clever or trendy. In fact, by the time I notice them, the clichés are moving on toward annoying. Consider the current phrase “It is what it is”, which by the way is actually an award-winning phrase. A Pittsburgh journalist annually awards the “Trite Trophy” to phrases that he wishes to disgrace. The phrase “It is what it is” was awarded the Trite Trophy twice; once in 2005 and again in 2006.<sup>2</sup>

So, this phrase, “It is what it is”, has been around for a dozen years or more, encouraging us face reality with patient acceptance rather than frustrated resistance.

The King James Version of the Bible give witness to the fact that God does not speak in clichés. Nonetheless, if there were holy slang, I don’t think this one would be used. I can’t imagine God looking upon our world, throwing up holy hands, and sighing “It is what it is.” In fact, our scripture reading from Deuteronomy today points to just the opposite.

The sections of Deuteronomy that were read this morning speak to the economics of the ancient Israelites; here are laws to be practiced when they entered the Promised Land. Every year, the people were to set apart a tithe of their field, then bring it to a place of the Lord’s choosing where they would celebrate together. This may well have been a pilgrimage festival, a time of rejoicing and worship. Every three years, the people were to bring a tenth of their produce to be stored for the needs of others. Specifically, this food was to go to the Levites since they did not have land, as well as to the resident aliens, orphans, and widows all of whom had no financial support. These offerings were designed to sustain those who could not sustain themselves. These were the annual and triennial patterns the people were to establish.

Then in the seventh year, there was something more. The 7<sup>th</sup> year was to be the sabbatical year of remission. In this year, the Israelites were called to forgive the debts that were owed to one another. In the 7<sup>th</sup> year, whatever balance had not been repaid on a loan was to be considered uncollectible;

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=spill%20the%20tea>

<sup>2</sup> New York Times, “It Is What It Is (Aaaargh)” <https://fifthdown.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/01/04/it-is-what-it-is/>

the individuals in debt were to be freed from that obligation. In addition, creditors were not to collect any property in lieu of the debt. The debtor was to be completely freed from the burden of indebtedness.

In the ancient world, it was likely that much of the debt that was incurred was the result of poverty. These were not loans taken to have sufficient capital to invest in a business nor were they loans to purchase housing or transportation. For some in our economy, debt can be a vehicle towards greater prosperity enabling business expansion or training which opens new doors of opportunity. These are not the loans referenced in Deuteronomy. Most likely, the debts in the ancient world came from hardship. Perhaps a disappointing harvest resulted in difficulties in feeding the family. Or maybe a day laborer grew ill and could not work for a period of time. Resources then run out. In such a situation, loans become a necessity. Consider them loans of desperation and an effort to tide someone or a family over until they could get back on their feet.<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy speaks to the creditors telling them to remit the debt; literally “to let it drop.”<sup>4</sup>

Notice in this passage that the debt remission is not universal. The Israelites were allowed to collect what was due to them from foreigners. One author suggests that “This foreigner is not a poor brother or disadvantaged resident alien, but most likely a merchant. The relationship would be commercial, not familial or neighborly.”<sup>5</sup> So the traveling merchant is not released of debt. This law about debt remission also is not designed for the most vulnerable in the community. The widows, orphans, and resident aliens needed ongoing charity. That is why there was an earlier command that every three years a tithe of produce was to be stored and distributed to those most in need.

In a sense, the sabbatical year of remission was for the working poor. I imagine some who needed loans were able to pay them off within a few years, but clearly there were others who were burdened with debt and unable to climb out from underneath its weight. When one’s economic state is fragile, debt can be particularly oppressive. It is an encumbrance. And if there are multiple misfortunes, the debts can send a person on a trajectory that seems unstoppable. In our day, it may start with a car. An individual’s car breaks down. He has no money to repair the car, so is unable to get to work. He loses his job and has less money to fix the car.

The sabbatical year of remission interrupts a downward trajectory. It is God’s way of interrupting a destructive path and an overwhelming burden. Being freed from debt, individuals and families can start over. They can plant crops, set out to work for the day, and simply rebuild their lives. Hope may be born.

This command to forgive debt, clearly helps individuals in need and is intended lead to a more just society. This is one of the best examples of the love of neighbor in Deuteronomy and one of the book’s kinder gentler passages.<sup>6</sup>

But there is more. It is deeper still.

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<sup>3</sup> *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, Richard Nelson, p. 192

<sup>4</sup> *Deuteronomy*, Thomas Mann p. 115

<sup>5</sup> *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, Richard Nelson, p. 195

<sup>6</sup> *Interpretation: Deuteronomy*, Patrick Miller, p. 1374

The commandment to release debt in the 7<sup>th</sup> year is grounded in the fourth commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.” (Exodus 20:8) This becomes a sabbath principle, which is given practical steps in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Deuteronomy. Patrick Miller, an Old Testament scholar, claims that “the sabbath principle “says “no!” to the assumption that once your circumstances have led you into bondage or slavery, there is no release and the chain of cause and effect must keep going on.”<sup>7</sup> This sabbath principle actually interrupts our own deeply held assumptions. Miller writes, “Two of our most common assumptions about the nature of human existence, to wit that time is linear and not cyclical or repeatable, and that the causal nexus of events cannot be broken or interrupted are shattered on the sabbatical principle of the Old Testament.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, it is what it is, until God interrupts it.

It reminds me of Newton’s first law of motion: “Every object persists in its state of rest or uniform motion in a straight line unless it is compelled to change that state by forces impressed on it.”<sup>9</sup> So, once a direction is set for north or south, good or ill, it will continue. If a person’s life is going downhill, it will keep going downhill, unless there is an interruption.

Locally, we have a wonderful example of decline that is turned around. A surprise in a pattern that many thought was irreversible. You who have lived in Durham longer than I, know full well how much the city of Durham has changed in the last 25 years. As I have become acquainted with my adopted hometown, I have often asked people how Durham transformed itself from a city in decline to one that is thriving. As one who was reared in the Detroit area, I can imagine how many communities in our country long to duplicate the transformation Durham has experienced.

A congregation member loaned me a book which answered a number of my questions. *Becoming Durham: Grit, Belief, and A City Transformed*, a coffee table style book, published last year, chronicles Durham’s recent history after providing a brief overview of the rise and decline of the tobacco industry. According to the book, in the 20 years between 1995 and 2015, the number of businesses in downtown Durham tripled from 200 to 600, the number of employees in downtown soared from 3,000 to 17,000, and the median age of downtown residents declined from the mid-50’s to 38.<sup>10</sup> An assortment of factors contributed to this renewal. Organizations such as this university, Self-Help Credit Union, and Downtown Durham Inc. each played an important role. And a variety of individuals were in the right place at the right time -- some with capital to invest, some with arrogance that would not take “no” for an answer, some with a vision for old buildings, and many with a love for the city. Included in the contributing factors is a student paper, written for a class at Duke’s business school. All of these factors and individuals contributed to changing the course of an entire city. A downward spiral was reversed.

I am not saying that this was God’s intervention to save a city, though I certainly would not rule that out. What I am suggesting is that if the downward trend that plagued Durham could be reversed, imagine all the things that God can do. Hear again what God’s want us to do through us.

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<sup>7</sup> “The Human Sabbath”, Patrick Miller, 95

file:///C:/Users/cmg69/Downloads/Princeton\_Seminary\_Journals\_PSB1985062\_dmd007.pdf

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 94

<sup>9</sup> NASA Newton’s First Law <https://www.grc.nasa.gov/www/K-12/airplane/newton1g.html>

<sup>10</sup> *Becoming Durham: Grit, Belief, and A City Transformed*, By Eleanor Spicer Rice and Robin Sutton Anders, p. 26

Deuteronomy instructs us to grant a remission of debts every seven years to those within the community. The frequent reference to those “in the community” is a way of indicating that the neighbors are to be treated like family, kin, brothers and sisters. Just as we would forgive a debt owed to us by a family member, so we should do so with those in our community. The commandment in this passage, however, is not just about actions, but also about attitude. If it is getting close to the 7<sup>th</sup> year and there will be little time for someone to repay the loan, we are still to lend willingly to meet whatever need there is. The hand is used as an image for this. The scripture warns us against being tight-fisted and instead encourages us to open our hand to those in need. The open hand also reminds us of the word “remit”, which as I mentioned earlier means, “to let it drop”. So our hands and our hearts are to be open throughout the years, and the sabbatical year of release is the dramatic example of just how open and generous we are to be.

We may have opportunity in our daily lives to forgive monetary debts and I expect some of you have done so. There are many other kinds of indebtedness within families and communities. Claims, grievances, duties, and commitments pile up in ways that create lasting tensions and deeply held resentments. Perhaps our inclination is to think such tensions and resentments will never be resolved. Perhaps we need a sabbatical year of remission, a time when our open hands may be part of forgiveness and restoration.

There is, of course, delight in the Holy interruption, in the Sabbath principle, in the year of remission. Those who are freed from the debt find hope and joy and a new beginning. They are no longer permanently weighed down by the burden of debt. Wonderfully, the creditors also find blessing in the Sabbatical year. As the creditors release their claim they discover that their economic assets are not their personal possessions, but instead held under the lordship of our Creator.<sup>11</sup> So creditors are freed from having to hold tightly to what they have and trust that it all belongs to God. This too is a freeing disruption in our lives.

Scripture also gives the reasoning for this instruction. The ancient Israelites were to remember that they were once slaves in Egypt, and God delivered them. Their lives had been interrupted by God’s grace and mercy, so now, they were to do the same for others. Grace leads to grace.

If Deuteronomy 15 points to the dramatic ways God wants to interrupt our lives, think of what Jesus does in Luke 4.

On the Sabbath day, Jesus stood up in the synagogue, and said “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” (Luke 4:18) And I am about to interrupt your lives and this world in ways you can’t even begin to imagine.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> *Deuteronomy*, Thomas Mann p. 114