Forgive us our debts . . .

We can owe a lot of things. We can owe money; we can owe thanks; we can owe an apology.

There is something satisfying about paying off a debt, like a car payment or a mortgage. The idea that the bank owned the car or the house, but now you do because you satisfied the debt, this idea brings power, freedom, even relief.

There is something crushing about debt. The mortgage crisis of 2008 buried people in debt they could never repay. The house they bought for 500,000 was now worth 350,000. The mortgage was secured with a very small down payment. Foreclosure and bankruptcy were the only options for many people. They were crushed with debt.

Often, we will speak of someone convicted of a crime and sentenced to a prison term as "owing a debt to society." Their term, or sentence, is the amount of time they owe. They will "serve" their time. The financial or economic terms do not match the experience. The time of punishment never restores the injured and the time served does not create freedom from debt. When someone has a "record" or has become labeled as a felon or ex-convict, they continue to pay, to be punished for whatever crime they committed. The debt is never truly satisfied.

From time to time we will misspeak or misunderstand, and in this moment we may often turn to someone and say, "I owe you an apology." In other words, my words, my failure has caused injury or offense and now I will seek to restore the balance, to offer words well-chosen or consideration better reflecting someone's dignity. In these words and thoughts it is as if we are paying a fine, being charged for our failure.

These debts and transactions of satisfying debt are for the most part very personal. We are reluctant to share how much debt we owe as it could change how people look at us. We keep failures and times of shame locked out of sight. They are the skeletons in the closet. People seek to seal the crimes of youth or to expunge a "record." We would need great trust in others to describe the times we were forgiven.

And then, there are moments where we seek to make our debts very public.

Twice in American history have we as a people needed to express our debts in public, on a grand scale, and many times over. Beginning in the 1880s, community after community constructed a monument or memorial to those who fought and died in the Civil War. Many of these statues were simply a list of those who died with a symbol lifted high atop a column. The symbol was often an enlisted soldier. They could be "at ease" or "on guard." Many of these monuments had an angel or a symbol of victory. In both the North and South some monuments were of generals on horseback. There were over 5000 of these statues spread throughout the states that waged war on each other.

The second time of mass construction of monuments was shortly after 9-11. Although the most famous monument and memorial is on the site of the World Trade Towers in lower Manhattan, there are thousands of monuments and memorial throughout the country. Every state has at least a few, some have dozens. In boroughs like the bedroom communities of Manhattan, these memorials list the people who died and were part of the town. Further out, the common memorial is small plaza or place of reflection in a park and quite often with two features. One is a call to "never forget." And the second is a piece of the towers, quite often a section of girder.

In each time of mass memorial construction the question of memory and debt rise to the surface. It is as if building a memorial where the list of names lost in battle or the relic from the one of the towers is there to offer thanks, to remember sacrifice, to honor the heroic, and, sometimes to find solace that the price paid in tragedy and battle were not in vain. Our memory, when we "never forget," somehow satisfies a debt of gratitude.

The purpose of memorial, to remember, and the intent of a monument, to honor, is sometimes complimented by a third construction, a museum. Often called a "visitor's center" or "interpretive center," this third element begs the question of freedom gained from debt or debts yet owed. The construction of the 9-11 museum was riddled with controversy and division as it sought to define who is to blame and thus what is owed. In a very different way, the recent construction of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, where the lives of African Americans who died by lynching in the Jim Crow South, was meant to suggest there is yet a price to be paid for racial injustice. Or, the monuments to the Civil War are myopic.

The mass construction of monuments and memorials in the decades after the Civil War and in the years after 9-11 are best understood as starting places to grasp the relationship between debt and memory. The public quality of the statuary and dedication plaques bring to the surface what we all live out in our private lives. For the past few years I have spent a lot of time exploring, visiting, researching the way we remember and how our memory is evoked and defined by art, by trauma, by history. Again and again what I discovered was this: beauty illumines our memory and has the power to heal what is broken.

During Lent this year, I will seek to capture this research in a daily devotional/reading. This is not a very traditional Lenten devotional. But my hope is that it will be a theological reflection on the need to remember and how our memory satisfies debts, both private and public. The link will appear on Facebook and then it will be found on the website of First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen. I will only post a title and link to the daily devotion on Facebook.

Closing Prayer
God of mercy, let us remember those who sacrificed for us; let us honor those who have made a way for us; and, let us amend what we have broken with grace. Amen.