

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 1/9/2019

Jeremiah 2:4-13
Psalm 81:10-16
Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16
Luke 14:1,7-14

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

There's a real sense within our community, and in the wider world, I think, that you don't get anything for nothing anymore. We live in a transactional type of world - you do something for someone, usually expecting that there will be a reciprocal response; or at least an acknowledgment of what you have done.

One descriptor of this type of mindset is "quid pro quo" - the Latin phrase used in English to mean an exchange of goods or services, in which one transfer is contingent upon the other; literally, "a favour for a favour".

And perhaps there are scenarios where this sort of arrangement could work. Two people might make an arrangement which is mutually beneficial, and both feel good about the situation. More often than not, however, the quid pro quo sort of thinking ends up with a feeling of disappointment and even disillusionment, when our own expectations are not met.

Today's Gospel has a number of different themes, but the one that jumped out to me was the critique of Jesus about this sort of transactional mindset - and Jesus basically tells us that this whole quid pro quo thing is not going to be a feature in God's plans - it's not part of the Kingdom of God.

And why? Well, says Jesus, the problem with a quid pro quo mentality is quantification. It's all about counting and calculating. But how do you measure or calculate a repayment that's all about love, or mercy, or compassion?

In our dealings with one another then, as Christians, Jesus says we need to forget about this counting business - it's not about keeping score. And that's challenging for us as we attempt to navigate our way through this world. But it's important. And it's important for two reasons.

Firstly, this is what Christ commands us to do - "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." Don't be calculating about what you are going to get in return when you reach out with an act of mercy and invitation.

But secondly - this is actually a theological issue for us. The fact is, the way in which we live - the way in which we treat one another in our lives is a reflection of our belief about who we think God is. For example, if we believe in a God who is merciful, we are called to act with mercy to one another - and, by the way, to be gentle with ourselves as well.

If, however, we insist that our faith, our salvation, is dependent upon an equal rate of exchange between God and us, then we need to ask ourselves, in what kind of God do we believe? What happens in that case if (or when) we don't measure up? And what makes us think we can assume certain systems to quantify the grace of God?

In my experience, this is not an issue which is confined to people in the congregation by any means. In fact, I think we priests are amongst the worst offenders in this regard. So many of our clergy gatherings and meetings are marked with conversations and discussions about achievements - and there is this assumption that our work might actually be the cause of some measure of success, be it higher attendance, thriving programs, or more money in the offering plates.

This sort of thinking is a dead-end road, actually. In the case of clergy and their ministry, and congregations in their lives of faith, this mindset results in a measuring of our worth based on models of outside evaluations and expectations rather than our faithfulness to God's ways.

We then run the risk of thinking that faith is contractual. That relationship with God is dependent on a nearsighted notion that God works within the world's insistence on agreements and bargains; transferences and contingencies; a quid pro quo relationship rather than a relationship made possible by the unmerited, unearned, unwarranted, undeserved love of God.

This story today calls out our propensity toward transactional faith. We expect God to move about in our economies that are dependent on proof of worth and jobs well done. We assume God will choose to maintain a relationship with us based on our character, or our abilities, or our status in life. But then we forget a key theological premise of Luke - God's measure of membership in the Kingdom has everything to do with how **God** sees us and not how *we see ourselves*.

Sometimes when you live in a quid pro quo world, it's difficult to imagine how the church can be in any way different. But we are called to more than that - we are called to life - a thriving, joyful life. Because that is the very essence of God - to give and grant life.

Acts of discipleship are our aim and our call. But these are not a means to an end. They are a means toward God's end of growing the Kingdom of God in our midst here and now. So let us think of ways, in our private lives but also our communal life together, that we can reach out with vulnerability to those around us, never expecting anything in return; but never assuming our acts are not valued or valuable, within God's sphere and God's Kingdom.

So let us welcome to the table those we may usually choose to ignore. Let's share everything we have (for it is all really God's, after all).

Let's listen more - to the very young; to those who do not have a strong voice in our society, that we might learn. And let's advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves: These are just a few actions that reflect radical hospitality. It doesn't have to be overly complicated or orchestrated; it simply has to be real and from the heart. In doing so, we will both be and experience blessing beyond our wildest imaginings.

And never forget - our lives are not to be lived so that we might somehow earn God's love, but only so that we might more fully live the lives our God of love so desires and envisions for us.

Amen