

SOMETHING FOR NOTHING
Sermon for Pentecost 20C (Proper 22)—Lk 17: 5-10
LPC, 10/2/16

If a stranger walked up to you in a public place and offered you a one-hundred-dollar bill, no strings attached, would you take it? What if it were \$1,000? Wouldn't you be a bit suspicious? Some of us might not be, but I would be. In our world, things of value don't generally come to us without cost. It's so rare that they do, that when they do, we are likely to be wary. Caveat emptor, after all. Let the buyer beware. If something seems too good to be true it probably is. You don't get something for nothing.

The corollary is also something we tend to live by. If you put something in, you should get something out. If you put in more than the next person, you should get more than the next person. It's only fair.

These axioms are self-evident in our culture. You don't get something for nothing, but you should get out what you put in. If it weren't for people assuming these ground rules, our social and economic systems might well fall apart. Human justice would cease to exist.

These attitudes are not unique to our culture. They are not unique to the modern age. The ancient system of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is based on this.

There are many stories in the Gospels that show the second of these axioms, that you should get out what you put in, was a generally held principle in Jesus' day. Think of the parable in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus told about the day laborers, who arrived to work in the master's field at different times of day. At the end of the day those who had worked for an hour were paid the same as those who had worked the full day. Of course those who had worked the full day expected more. It was only fair. If you put in more than the next person, you should get more than the next person.

Or how about the Parable of the Prodigal Son? The irresponsible runaway son is shown special honor upon his ignominious return, while the dutiful son gets business as usual. That was not fair. The elder had put in more than his selfish brother and was apparently getting back even less. If you put in more than the next person, you should get back more than the next person.

Here, today, we have yet another of Jesus' problem teachings from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus says, "When you have done all that you were order to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'" Now isn't *that* a terrific way to evangelize? Sometimes you have to wonder why Jesus had such a following, if he was going to say unappealing things like that.

Now, to be fair, Luke does make clear that in this instance, Jesus is not appealing to the general public. He is talking to his inner circle of apostles. The apostles have asked Jesus to increase their faith after he had given them some typically difficult teachings about how they must be careful not to mislead the innocent, and how they must forgive someone who sins against them seven times in a day. The disciples evidently recognize that following Jesus is going to be so challenging they are going to need more faith to do it.

I believe this is yet another instance of Jesus addressing the common assumption that if you put in more you should get out more. The disciples have certainly put in a lot. They have put in a lot and still recognize that Jesus' ethical teachings are so strict they are going to need fortification in order to fulfill them. They want to succeed at following Jesus. They want to earn his approval. They want to be worthy of apostleship.

Here, as in the Parable of the Laborers, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus gives the same message. God is not like that. That is how humans operate. Humans assume you don't get anything for nothing, and that you deserve more for giving more. Those are human principles. God is not like that.

God gives love, forgiveness, grace, and salvation for nothing. That is why God is compared to a parent. You don't earn your parents' love. They love you because you are theirs. You can be really, really good, follow all the rules, exceed your neighbor in righteousness, and you will be no more deserving of God's grace than he. All people, the evil and the good, are totally dependent on God, whether or not they realize it. At the end of the day, even if you have knocked yourself out to be virtuous, you will have done only what you ought to have done, and you will still be totally dependent upon God's mercy, which, is as freely given as a parent's.

To illustrate this point, I will retell a story I related in a sermon I preached here nine years ago. I hope you don't mind, but nine years is a long time, and the story bears repeating.

A man died and went to heaven. At the pearly gates St. Peter told him, "You get points for everything good you've done, and you need 100 points to get into heaven. So tell me, what have you done with your life?"

The man started confidently, "I helped raise my younger brothers and sisters after our father died. Then after college I spent a year doing missionary work in Africa. More recently I supported my elderly mother until she died, and I have tithed 15% of my income to the church for last several years.

"Wonderful!" said St. Peter. "All of that's worth four points. What else have you done?"

The man began to feel concerned. "Well," he said, "I helped with the local soup kitchen and I helped raise \$5 million for my alma mater, for a new library."

"Excellent!" said St. Peter. "You have been busy, haven't you? That gives you another two points. What else have you done?"

Now the man began to sweat. "OK," he said, "I was a Boy Scout leader, I taught Sunday School, and I was good to my dog."

"Congratulations," said St. Peter, "You have a total of nine points."

The man blurted in desperation, "Why, at this rate, I'll never get into heaven but by the grace of God!"

"Bingo!" said St. Peter.

Now, with this teaching, a person might be tempted either to despair or to the conclusion that it doesn't matter what you do, if bad people are as entitled to God's grace as you are. Giving into that temptation would be wrong. The appropriate response to a God who offers you everything for nothing is faith, love and gratitude. Faith as Jesus describes it is complete trust in and reliance of God, to whom you will never, ever, be a worthless slave, but a beloved child as worthy of grace as the holiest saint. And that's good news.