

Nothing to Pay

From the series: Images of God in the Stories of Jesus

Text: Luke 7:42

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Luke 7:42

How does one speak of God? I suggested last week that when Jesus spoke of God, Jesus did not leave us a catechism, but he told us stories - parables. Parables are extended figures of speech. Figures of speech enable us to deal with that which is beyond our experience in terms that are familiar to us. *Metaphor* comes from two Greek words, *meta* which means to carry over or beyond or across and *pherein* to carry, to bear. A metaphor carries us across the gulf of our knowing and enables us to have some sense of that Mystery that is beyond us. We deal with the unknown in terms of that which is familiar.

Jesus told us stories. He didn't leave us a catechism or give us a lecture on the nature of God. Thank God. But that reminded me that in our tradition we have certainly done a good deal of that. I pulled down a copy of the Westminster Confession, one of the great faith documents of our tradition, and the fourth question is "What is God?" Simple little question. The answer: "God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His being, power, wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." What is God? God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His being, power, wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. Turn you on? Move you?

Well, we could talk about all those terms I suppose, but it is interesting in all of the attributes that I referred to there is one glaring omission. Did you catch it? There is no mention of God's love. Not the simple definition that we have in the first Epistle of John, where John writes simply, "God is love." I don't mean to put the catechism down. It is a faithful document coming out of its own historical context that has been used in a significant way.

As I was thinking about the current series, "The Images of God in the Stories of Jesus," and the contrast from the way that Jesus revealed God and the way that

we have subsequently dealt with the nature of God or theological matters. In general, we have tended to write catechisms. We have tended to try to define in an intellectual fashion. We have used reasonable discourse in order to probe the mysteries that are beyond us. And, as a matter of fact, you cannot probe a mystery rationally. You can only deal with a mystery through a metaphor. That's why Jesus told stories. And we pick up the image of God. We get the sense of who God was for Jesus in the way he behaved, in the manner of life, and in the stories that he told. He conveyed the depths of God's being through the images that come through in his teaching and his ministry.

I want to suggest an image from God through Jesus that comes out of the morning lesson. There is a parable within a story. That story itself is very revealing and the story is the necessary context for understanding the parable. And the story itself was told by Jesus as an illustration. I should say the story was recorded in this context by Luke as an illustration of that which he was dealing. It's the same thing we had last week in the parable of the Prodigal Son. There were those who were grumbling because Jesus opened himself up to tax collectors and sinners. Jesus ran with ordinary people. Jesus had a kind of inclusiveness about him, about his relationships, which ran counter to the exclusivity of the religious leaders of the day--the Pharisees and the scribes.

As I said last week, the poor Pharisees were the best people in town and they get poor press in the New Testament. But this is because they are always set over against. They are always in that adversarial position, and in the case of Jesus they took offense because of his openness to all people and his refusal to discriminate against any, to draw lines and draw people out, and so they grumbled about this. He told the story of the Prodigal Son in order to deal with that. In this context, the discussion had been John the Baptist and Jesus, and in the 7th chapter in verses 29 and 30, Luke puts in a parenthesis and he says that the common people, all of the people including the tax collectors, had received John's baptism, and to have received John's baptism was to acknowledge that God was present in the life and ministry of John the Baptist. Just as to hear Jesus, Luke is saying, is to acknowledge that God was present in the life and ministry of Jesus. In the 30th verse of this 7th chapter of Luke, Luke tells us, by refusing to be baptized by him, that is John, the Pharisees and lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.

And Luke is saying similarly that, to refuse Jesus, to reject his message and manner of life was to refuse the purpose of God and then, as though to give an instance of this division between people – the ordinary folk who heard Jesus gladly and the religious elite who rejected him – Luke tells us the story of Simon the Pharisee who invited Jesus to dinner. And Luke doesn't tell us that there was anything sinister here, but obviously Simon, one of the religious leaders, was interested to find out for himself who this person was and what he was about, and whether the rumor was true that this one seemed to be a prophet of God.

And so Jesus came to dinner and as he was reclining at the table, as was the custom of the day, in a house that was open, which was also the custom of the day so that people off the street might wander in and wander out, while they were at dinner, a woman who was a sinner (The word probably indicates that she was a prostitute, a street-walker, a woman of the city.) came in and began to weep. Her tears wet the feet of Jesus. She wiped his feet with her hair and she had brought a flask of ointment and she anointed his feet in a display of emotion, which was quite out of line for proper decorum in such a setting. But something within her simply burst forth. This obviously was not the first time she had met Jesus. There had to be a prior occasion when he had looked at her, a prostitute, and communicated to her one way or another - through perhaps a word or a touch, or simply the gentle affirmation of his eyes, that she, a woman of the street, was a child of God, a person of worth to whom Jesus accorded a sense of human dignity.

It was too much for her. She experienced full forgiveness, newness, self-worth because she was valued by this one who was a prophet of God, and seeing him again and having intentionally entered in order to be near him, she lost it. Simon obviously was a bit uncomfortable with this rather erotically tinged display of emotion, but at least he seemed satisfied that the purpose of a dinner party was satisfied, for he says to himself, "If this man were a prophet he would know what manner of woman this is, and obviously would not have embraced her and allowed this display of emotion."

So then Jesus, on the basis of Simon's own criteria of what a prophet is, demonstrates that indeed he is a prophet. He reads his mind; he discerns the thoughts of Simon; he is aware of that turning of the wheels in Simon's mind and so he says, "Simon, I have something to say to you," and Simon says, "Speak on, teacher."

And he tells them the parable: Two debtors, one owing a huge sum, another owing a lesser sum, but alike in this: neither had anything to pay. And they were alike in this too: their creditor freely forgave them both. In that parable we have an image of God. In the King James Version, the version of which I memorized the Bible, the phrase, which is the title of the message, will be found. They had "Nothing to Pay." They had "Nothing to Pay."

And before we get to the image of God, perhaps we should say that there is also an image of humankind. In the presence of God we have "Nothing to Pay." Some of us have incurred a huge debt. Some of us need only a little bit of credit. We are not all the same. As Mark Twain said, "He was a good man in the worst sense of the word." God save us from too many people who are too good. They are not fun to be with. But there are good people. And then - there are the rest of us.

There is a whole spectrum of righteousness, or morality, or goodness. Jesus is not lumping the whole race in one pit of guilt and sin, but he is saying this, "The human condition is such that we are universally in debt and universally we have

“Nothing to Pay.” We don’t bring our record to God. George Bush is going to run on his record. But if you try that with God, that’s the very reason you are in trouble. It is a record. We have “Nothing to Pay.”

But the parable for our purposes this morning is also an image of God and that is where I want us to put the focus. The one who owed a great deal and the one who owed very little both had “Nothing to Pay,” but the creditor freely forgave them both. The word for cancel the debt or forgive the debt is *carisomi*. You are familiar with that Greek verb I am sure. I only display my erudition because, if you will listen carefully: *carisomi*, *caris*. The root of that verb is *caris*, and as you well know in this congregation the Greek word *caris* is grace. There is only one word really, isn’t there? Grace.

When neither had anything to pay, the creditor graciously, freely canceled the debt. Now that’s an image of God. The image of God that comes through in that story is very similar, it is exactly the same, as the image of God in the story of the Prodigal Son, which is not a story of a prodigal son but of Prodigal Love. As I said last week, in that simple story that Jesus told there is an image of God who simply waits to receive the child that will return - freely embracing, loving unconditionally.

And so I want to take the phrase that refers to the debtors, “Nothing to Pay,” and play with that. Let’s turn it around. Let’s now make it the requirement of God. If we have “Nothing to Pay,” let me suggest that, as far as God is concerned, there is “Nothing to Pay.” Oh, that sets the Gospel on its head in terms of the way you’ve always heard it. Hear me now. This is pure, undiluted heresy in terms of the way you’ve generally heard the Gospel preached, because you’ve generally heard the Gospel preached through the focus of Paul. And we have always used Paul to dampen Jesus. The radicality of these messages is that I am suggesting to you we ought to simply listen to Jesus once, without dragging Paul in, with all his metaphors with Roman law and the Roman court system and the transactions.

Now, if I am going to try to make this point in a sermon, I’ll tell you I have to go through the hymn book and really be careful about the hymns I pick because almost every hymn, almost every prayer, almost all the liturgy, the whole tradition of the Christian church conveys the idea that Jesus paid it all! Now, what if there is “Nothing to Pay?”

A friend of mine, Ernie Campbell, who used to be the pastor of the Riverside Church in New York, edits a little quarterly newsletter for preachers in order to help us out when we get in a tight spot on Saturday and don’t have an idea. Ernie writes this:

A couple of times in the last two months I have heard grace defined as “God’s riches at the expense of Christ.” I have not been able to track this definition to its source. Perhaps one of our readers could help in this regard.

“God’s riches at the expense of Christ.” I find this description of grace deeply troubling. What are we to make of the phrase “at the expense of Christ?” Are we to assume that God would be indifferent to us but for the intervention of Christ? And why the need to reach for a “transaction” metaphor: this for that, as though God were trapped by the accountant’s logic and could credit us only if he could debit Jesus. And are we saying that, because *we* have received grace through Christ, grace is not available to *others* under different auspices? Must grace be mediated? Is God not free to directly lavish grace on any or all out of the fullness of the Divine Nature? If grace is to be understood as exclusively Christ-related, how do we explain the lovingkindness of the Lord toward Israel?

The definition that most of us learned years ago is still valid. Grace is “the unmerited favor of God.” The unmerited favor of God. Period. Christ did not have to win it or earn it on our behalf. It was always there. Christ did not come to make grace *possible* but to make grace *visible*. Richard Niebuhr was right: “Most of our miseries come upon us because we cannot believe that God is as good as Jesus said He is.”

“Nothing to Pay.” We have “Nothing to Pay.” And God says there is “Nothing to Pay.” Just open your life to my love that is always there; be valued, given worth. Let your heart be broken by my unconditional love that requires nothing but simple access.

Simon had an image of God and lived out his image of God – because we do live out our image of God. Our image of God is probably the most shaping factor in our attitudes and our manner of life. Simon had an image of God and his image of God is revealed when he sees Jesus allowing this woman of the street to have this display of emotion, and receives her and accepts her. Simon’s image of God is this: God withdraws from the likes of that. If this man were a prophet of God he would act as God would act. He would put down a barrier; he would erect a wall; he would separate himself from this ordinary sinful human being.

Jesus lived out *his* image of God, and that was that God never erects a barrier, never builds a wall, never turns the back, but is always simply waiting - longing to do just one thing: to love us, to give us value. God’s love is groundless and infinite. God does not seek value. God’s love creates value. The son in the far country came into a pinch and began to strategize how he might go back and start as a servant and prove himself, prove himself, prove himself. He wasn’t transformed in the far country. He simply had started on the way back home. It was the salty tears of the father, the embrace of the father that changed the boy and got him out of that servant - servile mentality, enabling him again to be a son. The woman in the parable, too, was transformed by an unconditional love.

What image of God do we as a community convey? Let me suggest to you that, by and large, the Christian Church in its attitude, spirit, body language and decorations conveys an image of God much closer to Simon’s than to Jesus’.

Is there not a certain level of morality that is necessary in order to be a part of this community? Is there not a certain expectation, a certain living-up-to, a kind of standard? Is there not some kind of qualification to be considered a people of God? Do we not have barriers and walls, subtly suggested criteria communicated nonverbally by our very body language? And how about you - are you still doing your darnedest to show yourself worthy? Have you ever let down your guard as the woman let down her hair and wept in the face of a love that will never quit and only waits to be experienced?

The image of God in this story of Jesus is a God who says to the likes of us, who so love to pay our own way, "There's nothing to pay."