

Quid Pro Quo

The sermon title comes from a Latin phrase which was first used in 1535 in a work by the humanist writer Erasmus. The work was described the phrase as being on used among chemists and doctors with reference to medicine. In Latin the literal translation is “what for what” indicating something that can readily be exchanged for something—no actual change in the exchange, so to speak. This understanding for the meaning didn’t endure long in the English understanding becoming something for something else by 1560 in a legal document. Thus it migrated into a legalistic term which came to mean a “mutual consideration that passes between two parties to a contractual agreement, thereby rendering the agreement valid and binding.” This phrase describes a transactional relationship, where something is done in order to obtain something else. The text from Luke lends itself to this as a topic for us to consider because transactional relations are not what God has ever had in mind—not for our relationship to our Lord, or to each other. What God instituted with humanity was a covenant—also a legal term used to describe a contract—so how are we to discern the difference? The 8th century BC prophets all brought basically the same word from God to those God had claimed as being “his people”. Our text from Jeremiah opens with what is a lament—asking what wrong did the people see in God’s providing that they turned away from their relationship. Instead of seeking the relationship God desired, the people turned away and did not follow God’s ways instead seeking to adopt the ways of the people who had been living there and their god Baal. The answer is that God has done everything to provide them with the guidance that will lead to flourishing in the land promised to them, but they have defiled it. The Lord’s message then turns to a declaration of judgement. Jeremiah 2:13 message from God is “for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water” Then, as now, the climate of Israel was defined by a rainy season (winter) and a dry season (summer). The summer was beautiful, but required living near a natural, perennial source of water called “living water” because it moved. Springs and rivers provided this precious “living water.” The Israelites in the Iron Age developed a technique which allowed them to broaden the areas where they could live. They discovered they could dig out bell-shaped cisterns in the bedrock and create channels which would funnel the winter rains into them, but these had to sealed with a plaster or the water would leak out—and sometimes the plaster would crack so the cisterns failed. This simple statement is a metaphor which Jeremiah hoped to use to enlighten the people about what was wrong with their behavior. This passage is about Israel’s idolatry and how wrong their actions were. There is something rather tricky about idolatry—often when it is occurring, when we are doing it, it doesn’t seem like a false god is being worshiped. It seems that we are worshiping a true god. Or it seems like we are pursuing good ends, ordained by our true god. It seems like we are pursuing something necessary for our survival, and if we believe that our true god desires our survival, then surely the thing we pursue is not idolatrous. The people Jeremiah spoke to were trusting in their technology—those cisterns they had learned how to make. The accusation is that people have “forgotten” God, God’s act of deliverance was long ago and no longer seemed real to them. How does this metaphor describe our reality? In a society with so many churches...and other places of worship...we can

perhaps claim God is not forgotten here. It seems that the priests, rulers and people of Israel forgot to keep telling the stories of God's delivering them. Not knowing the story, they then quit seeking or asking where was God in their lives. God had provided water in the desert, but now they felt they could provide their own; until the plaster cracked and the water leaked out and they had nowhere to turn. But self-examination might suggest that we too have fallen in love with our own technologies believing in them rather than in God. For many the events which play out on their computer screens are more real than the people around them. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once noted that "Being a Christian is less about cautiously avoiding sin than about courageously and actively doing God's will." Because we all have a tendency to be self-centered, much of our focus as Christians is on pointing out the ways this concern for self rather than other is exhibited in our world so we can create boxes to check off disproving this. We do this often and well, but have frequently separated them from the central point of it all which is to determine and be obedient to God's will—we should be seeking first that relationship with God; that commitment to God as the one we seek to know and to whom we belong; to being in covenant relationship which will then guide all our actions without needing sets of "ethical standards" or regulations such as listed in the Hebrews text, Because all our actions will be done in that mutual love found through the Holy Spirit if we have committed to God. When we commit to this type of relationship we will see God everywhere we look; in everyone we meet and we will know how God wishes us to interact with others. This way of being Christian may make it simple in some ways, but it will not make it easy to accomplish. This brings me to today's gospel reading describing Jesus' actions on a Sabbath again. On his way to dine at the house of a leader of the Pharisees who were watching him "closely"; Jesus encounters a man who had dropsy. Jesus' asks the lawyers and Pharisees: "Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?" When they failed to answer, Jesus healed the man saying, "if one of you had a child or ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?" Again, they could not respond...so they all went in together. While the Pharisees are watching Jesus for evidence they could use against him, Jesus is also described as observing them. "When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable." This parable seems to draw on wisdom literature Jesus would have known: Proverbs 25: 6 and 7 --"⁶Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great;
⁷for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of a noble. "

The culture of the time was based on interactions of shame/honor and dictated much of the behavior of people. Status within the system motivated interactions so being asked by your host to move because you had taken the seat of someone higher on the pecking list than yourself would have indeed be humiliating. This would be an indication that you did not know your place and the physical action of having to move would have made this obvious to all. At first glance, it seems that Jesus is just issuing advice on proper social etiquette; advice appropriate for the culture. But Jesus' advice did not stop there...in fact he continues by admonishing these listeners to NOT take into account the social payoff or reward that comes with their invitations and hospitality. Indeed, Jesus proposes they upset the whole system saying instead of inviting those who already respect them or who are in a position to reward their hospitality or who would return their invitations, they should extend hospitality and thus honor to those who were outcast—those who were the poor, the sick, the socially undesirable.

Jesus wants them to show hospitality and honor to those who could not return the favor—to do it where there would be no quid pro quo. Jesus' whole focus—his whole life is centered on inviting us into relationships which no longer concentrate on counting things. Jesus wants us to stop counting the cost, benefits and rewards of our actions so we can live from a sense of abundance, not scarcity. Counting is so omnipresent in our lives that we almost forget it even exists much less how it dominates much of our actions. We are continually counting because we live with a sure conviction that there is not enough. Not enough money, time, prestige, resources, recognition and a host of other things we seem to believe are essential. Jesus' advice has now moved from savvy social advice to the illuminating theological framework of God's reign. Those who wish to reside there must not view the world through the lens of transactional living—do this so you may get that. Of course, this concept goes against all that the world proclaims—it is revolutionary...to do things which will not gain you something...to act in covenant relationship with all those God loves—including the poor, the disabled, the outcast—simply because since God loves, so do you. So when we look at these teachings of Jesus and our own actions, have we moved toward God's reign and abandoned the transactional aspect of our actions—are we doing what we do out of love or because we hope to ensure God's favorable opinion and thus earn God's grace. Again, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words come to mind: God's grace is free but discipleship is not without cost. We must leave behind the quid pro quo of the world and live into God's call to live in trust knowing we are loved fully just as are all those we may encounter whether they are like us or not—all are God's beloved children and we are called to see God's image in them. When we can truly leave quid pro quo behind us and live into God's love and vision, then we can join Jesus in proclaiming God's reign is near. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.