



Rev. Chris Taylor - 10.6.19

"A Holy Calling"

Luke 17:5-10

We've been hearing the phrase "quid pro quo" quite a bit lately. The issue has been whether the President made any promises in return for the "favor" he asked of the President of Ukraine. The President has acknowledged making the request that Ukraine investigate the Bidens. His own edited transcripts have confirmed it. But was there a promise of something in return – a phone call, or a personal meeting, or the release of the \$391 million that Congress had approved? The President has insisted there was no "quo;" no promise of anything in exchange. And so the impeachment investigation continues. By any standard, and no matter which side you are on, we can all agree these are troubled times for our country; a time in which we should all be praying for our nation's leadership.

Our lesson this morning has its own element of "quid pro quo". Our text is part of a series of brief, disconnected sayings that have been inserted by Luke into the midst of the larger narrative. The first ten verses of this seventeenth chapter contain four sayings that have come down to him and that were simply too good to leave out. So he bunched them together and placed them here at the beginning of the chapter. There is no connection with what precedes or what follows or even between the sayings themselves. Like a proverb, they each stand as an independent unit.

The "quid pro quo" section comes as the fourth in that series; verses 7 to 10. "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table?'" Well that actually sounds like a thoughtful, caring thing for the owner to do; something that Jesus himself might do in that position. But that's not where Jesus goes with this lesson. He wants to make a different point. When that slave comes in, he says, what you would tell him is to prepare your supper, put on his apron, and serve you something to eat and drink. That's what slaves do. They don't expect to be rewarded for simply doing their jobs.

Jesus' point here is that when it comes to our relationship with God, the same understanding should be applied to us. We can never be one-up on God; never put God in a place where God owes us some debt of gratitude. No matter how great our good works, we've only done our duty. God has always and forever done so much more for us than we could ever begin to repay. God doesn't operate out of debt or obligation. That's not what motivates God. There is, in other words, no "quid pro quo" with God.

It is an important lesson for us because sometimes we get this idea that if we are good enough that then God is somehow obligated to protect us and protect those we love; obligated to bless us in our journey. We may never consciously articulate it, but the thought is there, moving around in the back of our minds, "God owes me."

But God doesn't owe us anything. There is no question that life goes better with God. The guidance God offers shows us how life is meant to be lived, shows us how to experience life at its richest and best. Where we get in trouble is when we begin thinking that by living that life we are somehow earning God's special favor. That's not how it works. Nothing we do or don't do is going to change God's love for us, and the moment we believe otherwise, the moment we start thinking we can earn God's love, we are setting ourselves up for disappointment.

So here's my invitation, every time you hear the phrase "quid pro quo" in the coming weeks, take the opportunity to remind yourself, "there is no quid pro quo with God."

Well how about the verses just preceding these, verses 5 and 6? They offer their own special opportunity for distortion and misunderstanding. The promise seems clear: "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." Well talk about setting ourselves up for disappointment!

Years ago a good friend shared that when his young daughter was diagnosed with leukemia his church rallied around him and his family. They lifted his daughter up in constant prayer. Sadly, though, she didn't get better. Fifty years ago (when this took place) the treatment of childhood leukemia was nowhere near where it is today. But it was at this point that some well-meaning church

friends told Dick and Marge that if they just had more faith then surely their daughter would be healed. What they were saying, in effect, was that the problem was my friends' lack of faith. What a horrible thing to tell any parent!

You can see, though, where those people got the idea. It's right there in Scripture: if you have even the smallest amount of faith, then ask what you will and the miracles will happen. But of course, life doesn't always work that way. What we learn over time is that you can do everything right, you can have the faith of a lion, but still that's no guarantee that bad things won't happen to you or to those you love.

So what was Jesus saying? In his commentary on this text, preacher and author Fred Craddock points out that in the Greek language there are basically two types of "if" clauses – one based on a condition contrary to fact ("if I were you") and one based on a condition according to fact ("if you lived in Pittsburgh"). Our passage, he notes, is of the second type. Jesus isn't saying "If you only had enough faith." What he is saying is, "If you had faith, and you actually do..." He is affirming, in other words, the inherent power of the faith that his disciples and that we already have!

This is what I love then about this lesson: Jesus is saying even the tiny faith we have puts us in touch with a power that is infinitely greater than our own, a power (as Paul puts it in Ephesians) that can do abundantly more than we could ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20).

So think about this for a moment: over the last 50 years, the survival rates for childhood cancer have risen from 10% to almost 80%. When my friends lost their daughter to leukemia, the median survival rate was about six months. Today, we are seeing an overall cure rate of 85%.

So what happened? Fifty years ago a bunch of scientists and physicians had enough faith to believe they could do something about the abysmal survival rate of childhood cancer. Against all those who said "it can't be changed," or "don't waste your time," they invested their lives and resources in the effort to do better. And what happened? Because of their faith and their willingness to act upon it, the survival rate for children with cancer has been exponentially increased.

That's what Jesus is talking about: "If you have faith like this – and you do! – then who knows what you might be able to accomplish with God at your side!!"

The message is clear: Don't get discouraged. Don't give up. The greatest things, the most important and worthwhile things in this life happen when we stay the course. A cure for polio, a rocketship that can carry people to the moon, a strong and healthy marriage... There will always those who shake their heads and say it can't be done; or those so full of fear they can't muster the courage to take the field.

But we don't buy it. When God calls us, God provides a way. Believe just this much Jesus says, and who knows what we might accomplish when we step forward, when we do the hard thing not once or twice but again and again and again, knowing that as we do so the Lord himself is with us? Who knows what God might accomplish through us when we make that choice to step forward in faith and then persevere?

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Intepretation: Luke*, (John Knox Press, Louisville, 1990), p. 200