Sermon: 8-28-16 – “Not a Quid Pro Quo God”

We Pause and Reflect: Let the day open us to all that God gives in the Spirit: splendid arrays of gifts in communities and neighborhoods and churches; and the promise that God calls, gathers and unites all these gifts for the sake of hope and new life. We pray today that grace comes and that we be aware of it, grateful for it and willing to share it Amen.

If you are a business person or know someone who is or know something about business you have some understanding of Quid Pro Quo – The idea that “something is given or received for something else; “something for something.” So whether you are a business person or a mother or a father – child in school or a teacher, or a therapist or even a pastor – this Quid Pro Quo understanding is a common structure we use in order to function or maintain order or an arrangement. “If you clean your room you can go out with your friends and play.” “I will trade you this cool turtle for my nice new lunch box.” If you drive the kids today, I will drive them next week.” In the olden days Pastors and Therapists used to take goods or services for payment – “here is my finest chicken or I will paint your house for a session of therapy or officiating at a funeral or wedding.” Some things have changed and some things have remained the same with Quid Pro Quo.

The problem with quid pro quo is that it’s not as fairly matched as one would want or assume, such accepting a “chicken” for officiating at a wedding or a turtle for a lunch box. The value of the exchange is seen by those doing the exchange and often it’s hard to put a price on services or things sometimes, it doesn’t seem to be an even exchange. And yet, it seems how our world is set up and expected to function this way. There were a number of garage sales in my neighborhood yesterday, I helped Bill with his. Nothing was priced, and that is what makes it so difficult for me, because what I
think something is worth isn’t usually the case. The other thing is that people coming to rummage sales are looking for a deal and want to negotiate, so unless I know what the price range is I am worthless at that sort of thing. The value of the item is placed by the seller and the person buying, they negotiate – they do their “Quid Pro Quo” process.

So, today in our Gospel Jesus, comes along and basically says, “yeah, that whole quid pro quo thing? That’s not going to fly in the Kingdom of God.” “And why?” We might ask Jesus. “Well, Jesus says; here’s why,” The difficulty with a quid pro quo system is quantification. How do you measure or calculate repayment of love, of mercy?, of grace, or salvation? How do we calculate that? But we think we can sometimes – we think we can earn God’s love and forgiveness by doing something or more of something or asking for more forgiveness. Theological this becomes a problem or distortion regarding God’s Grace and how God’s Grace comes to us – and if there is any way to measure it in Quid Pro Quo System. There really isn’t – God’s Grace can only be measured by God’s love and by nothing we do or think we can do or deserve.

We tend to forget that our beliefs about faith and discipleship are also claims about who we think God is. If we insist that our faith, and 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 if we don’t measure up? And what makes us think we can assume that there are certain systems or methods to quantify the grace of God?

This understanding undermines what ministry is all about, quantification of service and faith and grace turns our ministry and into a works righteous way of believing, that we can do so many tasks and get so many service points to achieve a
higher level on God’s ladder of “Faith Achievement Scores” kind of like the PSAT’s or SAT or GRE exams for college and graduate school. God’s Grace and love doesn’t have those types of parameters or requirements or restrictions even if we are used to living within those systems. Often we think that in some way we can work our way or bargain our way into God’s gracious arms of forgiveness and a place of honor at the banquet table. If we just did more, God would approve of who we are and what we do. Then we can earn our way to the best Seat at the Banquet Table.

In our Gospel we hear something different: “Now on a Sabbath Jesus is dining at the home of "a ruler of the Pharisees." He talks about taking a place at the table, it’s not just good etiquette, it’s more than that. Luke calls it a parable so we are invited to look for an extension of Jesus’ meaning of what it means to be humble and servant of all – and the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

One pastor recalls an exercise he did with his confirmation class; the pastor stated: “I allowed there to be a committee of confirmation age youth to be at the entrance gate of Heaven. I set them up in my office to be that gate and invited adults to talk with this committee. The instruction was that as long as the person mentioned Jesus they should be let into Heaven. Everything went well for the first three adults. The last were an elderly couple, pillars of the church. They came out of my office sad faced, they had been denied heaven. I immediately went into my office, the entrance gate to heaven and asked what happened. This couple told the kids they were good people, regular church attenders, and good givers, but never once named Jesus. It was a teaching moment. What had they heard all those years going to worship? "no merit
of my own I claim, but wholly lean on Jesus’ name” My Hope is Built on Nothing Less 596,597 ELW.

In our parable today, Jesus uses the banquet of a wedding feast, not just a dinner to get his point across. To the host, Jesus gives further advice to invite those he probably never thought of inviting, because they could never repay the favor. In fact, it was probably the first time he had ever seen these people at all – “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” would probably not have been on the guest list. Such an act of kindness will not go unnoticed. Jesus tells us that God notices such things.

When you live and do ministry in a quid pro quo world, it’s difficult to imagine how church can be outside of that system. But imagine something different, not only for the sake of the future of the church, but for the sake of your very own survival as Christian people. Ministry is not to be about survival of the church based on a quid pro quo quotient. No. Ministry is about life – a thriving, joyful life, for all of us together as the people of God. Why? Because that is the very essence of God – to give life abundantly.

When people try to justify or quantify the activity of faith on the same terms as society assumes validation and verification, faith gets confused and we get lost. Faith in God can’t be held to the same earthly standards as a large corporation or even a small business. Acts of discipleship 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.

In the Magazine; Living Lutheran – June – 2016 - a pastor of a church shared a faith story of mission and evangelism: “We've decided to quit being a welcoming church. No kidding. We’re giving it up. Like so many congregations, we’ve sunk an amazing
amount of time and energy into becoming a welcoming church. We changed worship styles, trained greeters and ushers, wore name tags, brewed coffee, went to workshops on hospitality and put our friendliest people in the most prominent places on Sunday mornings.

Our congregation realized that we had been misplacing our emphasis. Welcoming, from a missional perspective, is passive. It denotes waiting for visitors and guests to drop by. Instead – We have become Inviting - Inviting is different. Inviting is active. We are now becoming an Inviting Church instead. Being an inviting church means that we leave the comfort of Sunday morning worship and seek out our neighbors. Being an inviting church starts with who God has called us to be as church and mandates joining God at work in the world.

Each congregation has a purpose within God’s mission. Each has particular gifts. No congregation is everything to everyone. But every congregation is something to someone. “11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” … 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14 And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” Amen.