

Setting the Bar Too High

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Luke 6: 27-36

It is so exciting for me to watch our new building – Pilgrim Center - getting closer to completion. I have begun discussions with a few folks about a gala dedication sometime in the new year - already thinking about it. And so it was interesting for me when this week, as I was thinking about the text for today and about a possible dedication service, I came across a pastor's description of another dedication. This was the dedication of a new sanctuary for a small church. They had been meeting in the barn of a church family, but finally had raised enough money and built a new sanctuary. The day of the dedication, the founding pastor preached on the text we heard today. Not everyone appreciated his choice of scripture for such an occasion.

Speaking about that day, the pastor writes, "Everybody seemed to have a good time except one man who came to me with a heavy brow and deeper voice. He had an objection about the day. I asked him what it was and he said, 'The Scripture you read.'

"I said, 'What was wrong with it?'

"He said, 'Bad choice.'

"I said, 'Well, those were the words of Jesus.'

"He answered, 'Well. There are a lot of words in the Bible that are out of keeping with the spirit of our time. It's just out of touch. What people expect of the church now-a-days is not a lot of talk about cross-bearing and loving enemies. They want to come to church to feel better, be a part of a group that will help them be successful and get together to mutually enjoy each other. So knock off these scriptures that are about 'ought' and 'must' and 'should.'

"I said, 'Why?'

"And he said, 'Because it sets the bar too high. If you keep doing it, you'll never have a church. You'll just be a little place where a few people meet once a week to make each other miserable. Scriptures like this one are out of touch with the spirit of the time.'"

"Love your enemies...give to everyone who begs from you...If you love those who love you what credit is that to you...do good, expecting nothing in return...and you will be children of the Most High, for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful just as your Father is merciful."

What do you think? Is Jesus setting the bar too high? Are such texts out of touch with the spirit of the times in which we live? After all, we do live in some angry and divisive times, where walls between people are awfully high and concepts such as cooperation and compromise are often denigrated as weak. A Republican governor thanks a Democratic President and is vilified as a traitor to his political party. And even in Sebastopol, where we are so proud of our progressive politics and our openness and tolerance, there were a number of nasty and bitter things said during the just completed election campaign leaving some open wounds in our life together. Love your enemy? Show mercy to the one who feels no mercy for you, care for the one who does not care for you? Today's angry and distrustful world is inclined to ask, "What kind of weak-kneed nonsense is that?" And Jesus quietly replies, "Well, that really is how God is. God is kind, even to the ungrateful and selfish, even to the ones who disagree with us about taxes, health care and CVS." Is Jesus setting the bar too high? Is he lost in some ideal never-never land where nobody lives?

Three times in our text we hear Jesus use the word, "credit." "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?" "If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?" And here's a tough one - "If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you?" What is interesting, at least I find it interesting, is that the word, "credit", in our text is translated as "grace" everywhere else in the Bible. So Jesus is saying, "If you love only those who love you, where is the grace in that?" "If you do good only to those who do good to you, where is the grace in that? That's the point here. We are to be gracious as God is gracious.

Reflecting on this text, preacher and New Testament professor, Fred Craddock says, "You are to love and to do good and to lend to people who will have absolutely no thanks to you, no gift in return, no positive response, no love to you, no kindness to you. Why? Because that's the way God does, that's the way God is. Says Jesus, if you want to be my follower you do not let your life become dictated by

the people around you. The people who reject you determine your life? No. The people who accept you determine your life? No. Enemies define your life? No. Friends define your life? No. The people who hate you, the people who love you, do not create your character. Your character is created by the character of God. You're to be children of God." Again, be gracious as God is gracious.

I think I'll continue with a Fred Craddock story – he is one of my favorite story tellers. "When I was a boy, our nearest neighbors down in West Tennessee were an African-American family, John and Jeanetta Graves, and their sons, Lee Grant and J.W. They had a well in the backyard with a crank and a bucket to get the water, just like we did. But theirs was a shallow well and sometimes John Graves would come up and call out to my father, 'Mr. Fred,' and Daddy would go out there and John would have a couple of buckets. "I came to get some water, our well is dry." And my father would always pick up a stone, rub the dirt off of it as best he could and drop it in our well. That's the way he could tell how much water we had. If it was just kind of a shallow, tinnish splash, my father would say to John, 'Well, we're going to divide this. Looks like we'll have something to drink, maybe wash our hands, but no bath tonight, John.' But when he dropped a stone in there and it went, 'kerplunk', my father would say, 'Take all you want; take enough to have a bath!' And John would say, 'Now, let's not get carried away.'"

A couple of summers ago I attended a retreat at San Francisco Theological Seminary which focused on engaging scripture. One question which was asked was: How do your five senses relate to the text – what does it smell like, what does it taste like, what does it feel like, what does it sound like? When I listen to this text, you know what I hear?...Kerplunk! It is what one theologian describes as the language of God's "sacred excess." Kerplunk – the well of God's graciousness is so deep...plenty to go around. So why are we so miserly with it?

John Henel from our building committee and I attended the Sebastopol City Council meeting on Nov. 20. Our church has paid over \$60,000 in fees and we were told that perhaps we could get some of those fees reduced or eliminated. We had groups that have used our facilities write letters to the Council in support of our request. John and I made the point that our intent was to use the new building to expand our church's long-standing tradition of community service. At first the Council was enthusiastic about our request, but the more they talked, the less enthusiastic they seemed to be. Finally, after much discussion, they agreed to refund our church \$5000. Now that was \$5000 more than we had when the evening began, but still I was frustrated. It felt to me that the City Council was not giving us enough love, not enough credit, for all that we do in this community. But as my level of anger and bitterness rose, believe it or not, I remembered our text. We do what we do here, not so that the City Council or anyone else will pat us on the head and give us money. We do what we do, because God calls us to do it; we do what we do so that in some small way, we can be a witness in our community to the abundant graciousness of God. That's what matters and continues to matter, whether or not we are thanked or noticed. So decided I needed to be more gracious and went back into the meeting and thanked each council member individually.

"Don't set the bar too high," the man said. "The world just doesn't work that way." And he had a point. The language of graciousness we find in texts such the one we heard today, is beautiful to read, lovely to contemplate, but also just darn hard. It's tough to be gracious in a world where relationships are complex and often painful and awkward and disappointing. Some are so high maintenance that they just take everything out of us. You don't need me to tell you that it's difficult to be gracious in a world like ours. "Don't set the bar too high. Better get real or you will never have a church."

Trouble is, I'm not the one setting the bar. I'm not the one getting carried away with this talk of abundant graciousness. Jesus is. And he is looking to us. So yes, we can talk about God's grace. We can wallow around in it and feel good about ourselves, all together in a great hot tub of grace. Which is fine. Nothing wrong with rejoicing in God's amazing grace. But that isn't the end of the story. For if this is all there is, if we are only kind to those who are kind to us, only give to those who give to us, there is Jesus saying, "Do to others as you would have them do to you;" there is Jesus wanting to know, "Where's the grace?"