



The New England Church Pulpit

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DEALING WITH GOD

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Christianity

Matthew 20.1-16

If God were in charge of the world, it would be like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace. He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right. So they went. When he went out again about noon, and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to these at the last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

Hindu

Bhagavad-Gita 6.24-32

*Abandoning all desires
born of his own selfish will,
one should learn to restrain
his unruly senses with his mind.*

*When his mind becomes clear and peaceful,
he enters absolute joy;
his passions are calmed forever;
he is utterly absorbed in God.*

*He who is rooted in oneness
realizes that I am
in every being; wherever
he goes, he remains in me.*

In a scene from the movie *Amadeus*, Viennese composer Antonio Salieri, a contemporary and rival of Mozart, is seen kneeling before a crucifix, trying to make a bargain with God. “Lord, make me a great composer! Let me celebrate your glory through music—and be celebrated myself. Make me famous throughout the world, dear God! Make me immortal!” “In return,” says Salieri, “I vow I will give you my chastity—my industry, my deepest humility, every hour of my life. And I will help my fellow man all I can.” In essence, Salieri is making a deal with God: I’ll sacrifice for you, and you in return will fulfill my desire for immortality and glory. But, as Miroslav Volf reminds us, God is not a negotiator. (*Christian Century*, April 19, 2005)

In our modern scientific world, we tend to think in terms of cause and effect. If I obey all of the laws, I won’t get arrested. If I am good, I will be rewarded. If I eat well and exercise, I will live a long life. Because such logic makes perfect sense to us, even though it doesn’t always play out like we think it should, we tend to assume it’s the only way to look at the world, and that God thinks like we do, that God is a God of logic and fairness. It only makes sense that if we stay on God’s good side, we will be rewarded.

But God’s ways are not our ways; God’s thoughts are not our thoughts. God is inconceivably so far above and beyond us that we can’t comprehend the nature or work or mind of God. To be able to express some ideas about God, we must use human terms and metaphors when describing God. These are necessary for us, but God is not limited to what our finite minds can grasp, nor limited to what our human words can convey. God is not bound by our logic or our expectations; indeed we limit God by our logic, by the parameters we place on God by predetermining how God will or will not act. If it makes sense to us, we think it makes sense to God. But it doesn’t work that way. The kingdom of God—that is, the world as it would be if God were in charge—is quite an upside-down version of the way we see it. Jesus illustrates this with this story about life as God sees it, where the first will be last and the last will be first.

Here is a group of workers who gathered each day in the city square, waiting for someone to hire them to work in the field for the day. Some were hired in the morning; they agreed upon a price and were glad to go to work. A few more were hired at noon and a few more mid-afternoon. They agreed upon a price and were glad to have at least half a day’s pay. And then a few were hired just an hour before quitting time. The owner of the vineyard didn’t see any good in them standing around so he put them to work. At the end of the day, everyone received the same wages. Is that fair? By our standards, no. By God’s standards, obviously. It is the point of Jesus’s story. God’s generosity is founded on God’s love; God’s actions are not subject to our sense of fairness.

If we take the approach that Salieri took in this movie, we will be sorely disappointed in God because God doesn’t always act the way we expect God to act. God is not a negotiator. To be a negotiator, one must need something that the other person has. God doesn’t need anything we have to offer. God can walk away from any proposition because there is nothing we have to bring to the bargaining table. Salieri offers God his chastity, industry and humility in return for musical genius, but God needs none of those things. God’s silence is taken as an agreement to the contract that Salieri proposed, but in reality, it was Salieri’s agenda, not God’s. Instead of Salieri getting the musical genius as reward for all of his sacrifice, it was Salieri’s nemesis, a young brat by the name of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who became the musical genius. It seemed entirely unfair to Salieri that this young whippersnapper, who didn’t play by the rules, and who wasn’t as God-fearing as Salieri, should nonetheless be rewarded with fame and talent. (Miroslav Volf)

We are owed nothing in this life, and to think that because we obey the Ten Commandments, or live a morally upright life, or avoid getting into trouble, God owes us something in return is ultimately blasphemous. It makes sense according to our human logic: faithfulness and sacrifice are rewarded. The Kingdom of God isn't about human logic; it isn't based on human work ethics; it isn't something to be negotiated. The Kingdom of God is about love and life as gifts given unconditionally.

God's love is given in covenant, not as part of a contract. There is no part of a bargain which God must live up to, and no requirements on our part, either. We respond to the gift by giving back, but even that isn't a requirement. When we approach the Ten Commandments, or the ten words, from Israel's history, and Jesus's even heavier interpretation, we realize how impossible it is for us to ever measure up to God's standards, and thus ever earn our way into God's favor. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus intensifies the situation by talking about something more than just outward acts. Prohibition against murder is intensified by Jesus's admonition not even to be angry; prohibition against adultery becomes an admonition not to lust; the precept to love one's neighbor is expanded to include loving one's enemies, as well. This makes it impossible to measure up to any standards of perfection.

But God doesn't expect us to be perfect. God expects us to be human, to be vulnerable, to be humble and to be happy. Commandments about ways to live are not bargaining chips for our own justification in God's sight, but are rather given to make life enjoyable, to bring a sense of joy and equanimity to our lives. It seems to me that God's delight in us is taken in the delight we take in life. The gifts we are given are pure gifts. There are no strings attached because we would only tie them in knots or use them to strangle other people. If God only loved us when we only did correct things, we'd never know love. God loves us because that is the nature of God and love. God is so besotted with us that there's nothing we can do to extricate ourselves from that love, even if we wanted to. Even denying God and not loving God in return doesn't change God's love for us. There's nothing more to negotiate.

How many times have we been in scrapes where we've tried to bargain with God? If you'll only spare me this situation, I'll do this or that for you. If you'll give me this, God, then I'll give you that. But such ersatz deals are bound to be disappointing, both to God and to us, for most of us, once we get what we want, tend to forget our end of the bargain for very long.

There is a scene in the movie *Chocolat* where the Mayor is seen at the foot of the crucifix in the cathedral asking why God doesn't respond to all that he, the mayor, has sacrificed for the cause of the church. While he fasts meticulously during lent and attends church each day for prayers, and works diligently to uphold the morals of the little village faithfully, those who are godless and unchurched and who are indulging in the decadence of chocolate are enjoying life a lot more than he is. It seems that they are being rewarded for their gluttony while he is being punished for his faithfulness. He is as jealous of those who live carefree, non-religious lives without consequence as are the laborers who worked all day were jealous of those who only worked an hour. At the foot of the cross, he asks why. He is confused, angry and very disappointed that God didn't uphold the bargain that the mayor assumed had been made.

Mozart was a great musician; Salieri was a great musician, as far as that goes but he couldn't accept second place. Salieri ends up a bitter old man, angry at God, angry at the world, angry at himself. The entire course of his life rested on the deal he thought he'd made with God. God proved to be 'wicked,' giving him '32 years of meaningless fame,' he said, only to be thrust into oblivion in the shadow of the great Mozart. But there had been no deal made other than in Salieri's mind. We can't deal with God.

It is easy to be jealous of those who succeed without really trying; or of those who come out on top without any retribution for the shenanigans they pulled to get there; or of those who have a natural talent in an area we have to work like slaves to achieve. It is our human tendency to want consequences for wrong doing...when it's the other person who suffers the consequences but to implore leniency or forgiveness when we have perpetrated the evil.

God is not a negotiator; God is love. Love does not envy; it is not boastful; it seeks the good for all and takes no delight in wrongdoing. God didn't die on a cross to set up terms of a contract with requirements to earn God's love. What God gives is not a contract but a covenant, a relationship not a good deal. Dealing with God has to do with accepting the gift rather than making a bargain. Amen.

—Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Merciful God, whose love has been at the very heart of our existence, we gather again to give thanks for the beauty that inspires us each day: for the joy of human love, given and received; for the activities of each day that bring purpose to life and for the quiet of evening rest to renew our bodies, minds and souls; for the response of neighbors when we are in need and for the comfort of caretakers when we are ill.

We are ever in prayer for those who have endured the overflowing rivers and the torrents of rain that have flooded homes, wiping out a life time of memories and hard work. We stand in amazement at the response of organizations and friends who are willing to give aid in the crisis. We pray that those who are affected by the flood waters will not be so devastated that they cannot pick up the pieces and move on, realizing that life is more than possessions. And give us generous spirits to help when we can, and to offer our financial resources to assist the most desperate.

For those who have lost loved ones and those who struggle with illness, for those who are down and out, for those who are oppressed, for those who are beleaguered by war, we pray your spirit to empower them with a holy strength. Bestow peace even in their trauma and be to them the unseen saving grace they need.

Merciful God, because we love our world so much, we pray now for grace to quarrel with it. Give us wisdom enough to take umbrage with those things that run counter to your way and your truth. Give us the willingness to quarrel with the worship of success and power, and with the assumption that people are less important than the bottom line. Give us courage to quarrel with a culture that tends to exploit rather than satisfy the wants of people. Give us courage to quarrel with those who pledge allegiance to one race rather than to the human race. Give us wisdom to know what messages we can trust, as we are bombarded with newspapers, television and magazines that are more interested in selling than informing accurately.

We pray that we may be good citizens of this world as well as your kingdom; that we may be servants of love more than brokers of success; that we may be part of your body of justice and peace in all we do and say. In the name of the Christ, amen.