

Problem: We treat faith as a transaction.

-I have to admit that I am addicted to going after a good deal. Infact, I have been known a little bit in our family as a “Craigslist Guru”: spending a crazy amount of time paging through ads in order to find the perfect item for the right price. When I spent time in the Old City markets of Jerusalem, I perfected the art of bargaining. The way to do it, I was told, was if you didn’t like the price that the storekeeper was offering the item for, you simply walked away. If the seller was serious about actually selling the item, they would yell at you their final offer which you could then decide to accept or not. Infact, I perfected this art of bargaining so much that I was able to get a piece of cloth for my girlfriend at the time(Abby) for 18 shekels instead of 60 shekels (a 70% reduction in price)!

-Even though we might not haggle in this country like that, we do bargain hunt a lot. Many store chains (such as Walmart) are built upon the notion of bargains and the cheapest transaction possible (Save money. Live better.)

-It’s no wonder that because our economy is so based upon transaction, many of us can’t help but think of faith as a similar concept. We’ve all heard it before: “I have screwed up this last week, but it’s all OK. I went to church this morning, prayed a little, and gave an offering. This should help cancel it all out.”

-It all makes sense right? We live a life of faith or devotion. Since we have “paid” with our life of servanthood or service, then what do we get? Well, we get everlasting salvation and everlasting life. It’s kinda like If I go to the store and I give them money, they give me food or electronics or furniture or whatever I buy. I give faithfulness to God. God gives me blessing and everlasting life. I understand how our economy works, so clearly my faith in God is the same way. It’s easy!

-The only problem to this way of faith is that it’s not a way of faith at all. It’s a false understanding of how relationship to God works, but that is preached again and again by many churches and it drives me nuts.

Solution: We don’t live a life of faith for what we hope to receive, because it’s ALREADY there!

-We have a similar struggle with what faith means in our gospel text for today. Here Jesus is in the process of sending the disciples out to do ministry: to heal the sick, to help the poor, to tell others how much God loves them. Yet, they are having a big problem: forgiveness. “And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, “I repent”, you must forgive.’ “ (verse 4)

-Yet something seems to happen, the text doesn’t say, where the disciples are not able to forgive as Jesus is calling them to do. It’s interesting seeing the disciples understanding of faith here as they come back to Jesus and say: “increase our faith, Lord!” We can’t seem to forgive this person so the problem is we don’t have enough faith. The gas tank seems to be empty and we need to go down to the Town Pump and

get filled up. Again, faith is understood in this context as something to be transacted in order to gain a benefit.

-What is Jesus' response? Guess what: FAITH CANNOT BE QUANTIFIED. Faith can't be "counted." That's the point of this mustard seed analogy: "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." (verse 6) Even faith the size of a mustard seed can do miraculous things. It's doesn't matter "how much". The "how much" question doesn't apply. Faith cannot be "counted" so you can't transact it for some benefit.

-I remember coming back from living in England for a year when I was in the ELCA Young Adults for Global Mission program and it was really challenging. Infact I was probably borderline depressed as the stress of switching from one culture to another, starting seminary, and getting used to a new living situation of living with one's parents mounted. I remember going to a "returning home" retreat where a professional therapist was offering services. I sat down and talked with her about all of this and for the first time I was actually able to name the "muck" I was in: depression and re-entry shock. It was such a relief to be able to do this, but of course, my 23 year old mind immediately jumped to: "how am I going to solve this? Do I need drugs? Do I need psychology intervention?" She chuckled and said, yes, seeing a therapist would probably help. But, most importantly knowing that God is in that struggle too. You will change lives when witnessing this struggle to others. And in changing lives by witnessing this struggle to others, you will find a way out. I promise you, she said as our session ended, the way out of your struggle is already inside of you.

-"It's already inside of you." This completely changed my life and my understanding of my own life of faith. Faith is not something bartered or sold, it's something that is already inside each everyone of us. It's something that is *given* to us not by how much we accomplish, but by simply being *us* (children of God).

Implication: Faith is not a transaction, but a way of life. How is our way of life a stumbling block for other lives?

-Thus, it's really not about us at all.

-In our adult education class where we are listening to lectures on Martin Luther, Dr Philip Carey talks about the shift in Luther's thinking of faith from "I" to "me". In this time (as well as in Martin Luther's time), we can be used to the thinking of: "I have faith in God" or "I am doing work for Jesus Christ". But one of the things that changed for Luther and which he spends the rest of his life emphasizing is this: I am not the subject! Instead, faith for Luther as Dr. Carey points out, is about "God loving me. God sending Jesus Christ for me." *God is the subject. I/we are the object. IT'S NOT ABOUT ME!*

-This is where this text, I believe, finally ends up with the servant language. Notice again, I am using the word servant, not slave, as slavery for us in the American context with the Civil War can slightly derail us from the purpose of this section.

-Because this last part is not really about slavery per se, it's about the danger in seeing yourself as the *object*.

-“Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the servant for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless servants; we have done only what we ought to have done!' ” (verses 8-10)

-Just as it becomes dangerous for us seeing faith as a transaction, it also becomes dangerous in seeing ourselves as so “rich” in faith that we become what is important and in turn put barriers up for others. This text challenges us to see those barriers that we might put up for others by seeing ourselves as the subject, not the object.

-Let me finally conclude that this is exactly what our brainstorming after worship at the church picnic is all about. It's about challenging ourselves to get out of being “the subject” sometimes and looking for where we might be able to take down some of those barriers that we might put up. It is about listening to our community and being Christ in our community as much as we can. Because at the end of the day, it's really is about the gift of faith that God has given us. Though we may not really deserve it. Though we might abuse it and not do with it what God intends, it is still there for us as a gift. Thanks be to God that faith doesn't follow our traditional economic rules and in that, we might be able to break down barriers for others. Amen.