

“C’mon, Jesus—Pay Up!”

A Sermon by David Barker

November 6, 2011

Luke 17:5-10

Do you remember being given an allowance growing up?

- I think I was about six or so...my mom and dad thought I’d reached the age it was time for me to cultivate an appreciation for the value of money
- so, they sat me down for a parental chin-wag: you keep your room clean, feed the dog, take out the trash... we’ll give you fifty cents a week
- in receiving an allowance, my parents in fact gave me more than money...they also gave me an introduction to the free market system...the basics of an *exchange economy*
 - exchange your time and labor for a wage, your money for a product, mindful of whether or not said exchange is equitable
 - is my time and labor, in other words, worth what I’m getting in return, what I’m being paid?
 - or, coming at it the other direction, is the product received worth the money I’ve paid for it?
- with my allowance, therefore, a number of important lessons were learned, not the least of which was this: once we’ve given *our* part of the exchange—time, labor, money—we are due something in return
 - we are, in a word, *owed*

These are important lessons, not merely because exchange economies are foundational to our vocational and economic lives...they’re equally foundational, it seems to me, to our emotional lives...our relationships

- we make an investment in a marriage, a romance, a friendship, giving of our time and energy and, yes, money...and, typically, expect an equal investment in return

In fact, exchange economies are at work in virtually every area of our lives, and why not?

- they represent a sensible way to structure our lives, to maintain balance and fairness, to ensure as best we can equitable treatment for all
 - I’ve given you “A” ...you owe me “B”

It works...even in the pre-capitalist society the disciples knew...a society of kings and subjects, of rulers and servants and slaves...yet a society that knew nonetheless there's no such thing as a free lunch

--it's reciprocity: in the world, demands a certain size require resources of a certain size, and pay dividends of a certain size

In the world...but *not* in the Kingdom...

The demands of discipleship and life in the Kingdom were never far from Jesus' teaching whatever else it may have been about

--such is the case this morning where, seemingly out of the blue, the disciples suddenly shout, "Increase our faith!"

--daughter Jessica would say, "That's pretty random," but it turns out that the disciples have been paying attention and, for once, they've gotten it right: there is a connection between faith and living as God expects us to live

--we live *from* faith, we live *in* faith, our ability to be good disciples, to work for the Kingdom, rooted in and nurtured by our faith

--and growth of our faith is less a function of exercising our discipleship muscles, important as that is, than it is the work of the Spirit within us

--so it is that the disciples, desiring to further their faith, don't look at one another and say, let's go do some heavy disciple stuff, but look at Jesus and say, *Lord, increase our faith!*

--tellingly, the disciples have drawn an obvious conclusion:

--demands a certain size require resources of a certain size

--being disciples in and for the Kingdom is a big job that requires big faith

How to explain, then, Jesus' response: if you had faith even the size of a mustard seed—a very, very small seed, indeed—you could tell a tree to uproot itself and go jump in the ocean...and it would

--Jesus is saying, you are right, there *is* a connection between your faith and your ability to live as God expects you to live

--and right, too, that the growth of your faith is as much a gift from the Holy Spirit as it is a consequence of your actions as disciples

--but Jesus is also saying this: where you're wrong is in thinking that to do all the Kingdom demands you must have *more* faith, *bigger* faith

--you don't need *more* faith, Jesus is saying, because faith even the size of a mustard seed can result in miracles

--what you need is *right* faith...and right faith, Jesus suggests, requires right attitude

Right attitude...think of it this way...

- in the world, take a job like plowing a field or tending sheep...
 - small field, small flock...small demands
 - but a big field, big flock...*big* demands...agribusiness, a fleet of tractors, an entire payroll of shepherds...
 - big bills...you pay up big time...people give you a lot, you owe them a lot
- but in the Kingdom, though discipleship makes *incredible* demands, it pays *nothing*
- in fact, in agreeing to do it, we agree to *expect* nothing...expect nothing because we are *owed* nothing
- and Jesus, to his credit, is straight up about this: in the Kingdom, we're slaves...we do the job because that's what slaves do...it's who we are
- what we receive in return—grace, redemption, salvation, the strength of spirit and peace of mind to be about the business of the Kingdom in the first place—we receive not because we're owed, but as a gift
 - and, to be completely honest about it, we don't deserve the gift

Such is the explanation of Jesus' response to the disciples: a right faith recognizes God and the Kingdom owe us nothing, yet give us everything

Now, my guess is that the disciples weren't thrilled by this

- like so much else about the Kingdom, the attitude Jesus is demanding is counter-intuitive
- and my guess is that most of *us* aren't thrilled with it, either
 - churches are full of people who, frankly, think the Kingdom, let alone the church itself, owes them something...they bring their exchange economy mindset with them to the pews
 - they've given their time, their labor, their money, they say, yet they're not convinced the exchange is equitable
 - worship isn't quite the way they like it, the preacher doesn't quite preach to suit them, their favorite benevolences aren't supported
- and it isn't just people inside the church...talk to folks outside the church, and they're often up to their armpits in an exchange economy
 - I used to attend church, they'll say, I used to believe in God, but I stopped because I didn't get much out of it...too many demands, not enough payback
 - they put in "A"—of that they are convinced—but didn't get "B"

In fact, I'd go so far as to say the case can be made that most of the problems plaguing most churches, plaguing most people *about* most churches, are problems rooted one way or another in the simple fact that people don't feel they're getting what they're owed

- my room's clean, the dog is fed, the trash is in the can...I oughtta be getting more than fifty cents
- or at least getting it the way I want it

We *should* have expectations of the church, in the name of accountability if nothing else...and it isn't wrong to have expectations of the Kingdom, even of God

- in all of these, after all, we've invested of ourselves: our time, our talent, our treasure
- if we're not nurtured to do the Lord's work in the place where we are, we have not only the right but the responsibility to ourselves and to the Kingdom to seek a place where we are nurtured
- where we go off the rails is when our *expectations* become *entitlement*...the church, the Kingdom, owes me
 - because we've given God, the Kingdom, the church "A," we are *entitled* to "B"
 - but when that happens, discipleship becomes a kind of collective bargaining...we in the pews, the workers...church leadership, even God: management
 - spiritual nurture becomes a product, one bought and sold like breakfast cereal—by weight, not by volume—and we should bloody well get every ounce we think we've paid for
- when faith and discipleship become commodities in an exchange economy, the work of the Kingdom becomes contract labor, and we no longer make decisions based on what's right for God's mission, but on what's profitable for us
 - based not on what God expects, but on what we need
- and the Christian life becomes much less about what spreads the Gospel, and more about what benefits and comforts and satisfies us most

The Kingdom of God, we say, is so often at odds with the world and nowhere is that more plain than here: the Kingdom is *not* built on an exchange economy

- that fact alone results in several realities that you and I, poised on the cusp of stewardship season, can, if I may say so, profit from coming to grips with

- first, we may live in the world but our life is in the Kingdom

 - the challenge, therefore, is not to expect the Kingdom to work like the world, but to put Kingdom values to work in our daily lives

- second, however efficient and appropriate exchange economies are in the world, the Kingdom—and the church—is not a business

 - the church has business to do, but the church is *not* a business, not even a non-profit business

 - consequently, approaching the church, the Kingdom as if they were a business is not only inappropriate, it is contrary to Scripture

- and third—and this follows from the first two—we cannot approach giving to the church the same way we approach giving to other entities

 - our giving should not be motivated by whether or not we think it's a safe investment

 - nor should it be motivated by what we think we should or will get in return

 - nor should it be motivated solely by the fact that the church needs it
 - it costs money to run a church and where else, after all, can that money come from other than its members?

 - and certainly it shouldn't be motivated by guilt or habit or a sermon, no matter how compelling the preaching

 - the *only* right motivation for giving to the church is because of what God, through Jesus Christ, has given us

If a right faith recognizes God and the Kingdom owe us nothing, yet give us everything, what other response can we possibly make but to give of our time, talent, and treasure in return?