

How's About a Deal, God?

If you've ever made a bargain with God----you know what I'm talking about----"Do this for me God, and I'll do that for you"----then, you have a friend in Naaman. He is a top general. The David Patraeus of his day. But, he has a problem. A skin disease. They called it leprosy. It threatened his career. It threatened his life.

So here he comes, horses loaded down with silver and gold. Those 10 talents of silver? About \$200,000 in today's money. Plus gold. Plus other finery. "I'll give this to you, prophet of God, if you will make me well." That is what was unsaid, but still screaming out loud.

Funny thing though. Ours is not a God who cuts deals. And when you think of it, why should the creator of all that is need to make a swap with you or with me? Instead, our gracious God does what he usually does. He blows Naaman's mind. A dip in the Jordan, for free! Keep your money Naaman, you are clean, a free gift from the God who has given us all of creation for free.

You know, the last two verses of this story didn't make it into our reading today. Here is what they say: "After his cure, Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. Naaman stood before Elijah and said: "Now I know there is no God in all the world except the God of Israel. Please accept now a gift from your servant. The prophet answered: "As surely as the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing."

Naaman wanted a magic show. He wanted hand waving, mumbo jumbo, some pomp and circumstance to go with his cure. He didn't get it. And I think most of all, old Naaman really wanted to unload that money on Elijah....so he wouldn't be in God's debt. It would just be a business deal. Money exchanged for health.

And when you think of your bargains with God, is it sometimes, maybe, that way with us? Tit for tat. "We're all square God, you and me."

Which really gets to the core of the problem over these "deals" with God. It's the problem Paul was wrestling with as he takes the incredibly radical shift away from the law, away from outward shows of faith (like circumcision) and away, most emphatically, from a relationship with God that rests on a deal.

Over the years, the Jewish people, particularly the high mucky mucks, came to completely misunderstand that first gift of freedom when they were liberated from slavery. Rather than a guide to stay in a relationship of trust and dependence and need and devotion to God, the law became a way to earn, to deserve, to be entitled to, what was always intended to be a gift.

As we relate to God, so we relate to one another. If our relationship with God is based on bargains and deals, and fair and square, and entitlement, so will be our

relations with one another. And into that way of life comes score-keeping and expectation and entitlement and of course, disappointment, anger, even revenge.

But a relationship built on grace, it was for this that Jesus sent the 70 to live out, in the flesh, in real life. A life lived solely in grace. Relationships formed, solely on grace. A day lived, dusk to dawn, trusting only grace. You heard it! Carry no purse! No sandals! No bag! Go into the world totally vulnerable. Totally in need.

Be what we all are.

Be what we all are.

And what did the 70 discover? They discover a freedom so profound they could not contain themselves. In pure joy they came back to Jesus. In pure joy they practically holler out loud that the powers and principalities that seem to have us so trapped, so defeated, so confused, so lonely, that when they launched out, carrying only the grace of God, every one of those powers, every one of those principalities, collapsed before them! Every one.

Now, this state of grace is tough to stay within. 70 went out. 70 returned in joy. But in just a few weeks, the 70 would be scattered. They, like us, stepped outside of the grace and once again stepped inside the world as it seems to be: in need of deals, of quid pro quo, of just deserts. Of what I deserve.

To learn how to remain in grace is the purpose and meaning of our lives. It is the great journey we embark upon every morning when you, when I, when we, open our eyes to a new day. Learning to remain in that state of grace is why we gather every Sunday, week in, week out.

We need each other. We need the power of the Spirit. We need the power of the Sacrament. For in that power is the power to live on the frontier of the Kingdom of God. We gather every Sunday, so that Monday through Saturday we might live in that frontier.

The finger of God came close to Naaman, and for free, this gentile warrior was made clean. The finger of God lifted the veil from Paul's eyes so the law, and its outward acts, were transformed into grace.

May the finger of God come close to you this day; and if you feel it, let loose your bargains, set down your entitlement, release what you are owed.

A new creation is here!

And in that creation, may "peace be upon you, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God."

+amen

