The God Beyond Manipulation

A Meditation on Luke 12: 13 – 21

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church July 7, 2019

Mom, make him stop!

Dad, why do I have to take out the trash? Why can’t you make [insert name of sibling] do it?

Mom, why don’t I get an allowance? ALL my friends get an allowance!

Dad, tell [name of sibling] he has to share the [fill in the blank.]

It’s… NOT… fair!!

As children we are constantly complaining to our parents about the unfairness of it all. As children we want our parents to “fix it.” Make *someone else* play fair. Make *someone else* share. Make *someone else* do the work. Unless the exact same things are required of everyone, unless the exact same things are given to everyone, it’s not fair. And that’s the reality of it: life’s not fair. It’s one of the most brutal lessons we learn. Nice people don’t necessarily get ahead. Kind actions are not always reciprocated. Just because you forgive, does not mean someone will forgive you. It’s not fair.

Yet these same phrases we said as children, or that we heard our children say to us, are some of the same prayers we offer to God. We might phrase them differently, but we still say them.

God, why don’t you make them stop?

God, why can’t I catch a break?   
God, it’s… not… fair.

And we *should* say these things to God, but we must also be prepared for God’s truths. God is always on the side of the oppressed and those who suffer from injustice, but God will also speak plain truth to us, truth we might not necessarily want to hear. If we ask God a question, we need to be prepared for the response.

God cannot be manipulated for our own purposes.

Which is what the man at the beginning of our story was hoping to do. “Hey, Jesus, you “justice speaking man,” tell my brother to give me some of our father’s money!” Why he thought Jesus the rabbi had the authority to issue this command we don’t know. People came to Jesus for fabulous reasons. They came for healing – for themselves or those they love. The hungry came to be fed. The hopeful came to hear a story of welcome and forgiveness. Lawyers and religious leaders came with their questions and riddles. Some brought him their pain and sorrow and heartbreak. A few even came to bring him a gift. Everyone who came brought their curiosity. Some even came wondering if they might glimpse the face of God.

There were common questions: can you heal me? Can you feed me? Can you help me? And then there were the questions designed to be tricks or traps.

* “What is the greatest commandment?” asked one lawyer.
* “Who is my neighbor?” posed another. (Luke 10)
* “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?” asked a Pharisee. (Mark 12)
* “If a woman has seven different husbands in this life, whose wife will she be in heaven?” asked a Sadducee. (Matthew 22)

But Jesus can’t be tricked or trapped or manipulated for our purposes.

Imagine you have an opportunity to walk along the road with Jesus or to join him at a meal. Imagine you have an opportunity to ask him a burning question. You have the chance to ask him for something. And here’s the question you toss to Jesus: *“Can you make my brother give me some money?”* Where was his momma to knock some sense into her boy? He wants Jesus, homeless, empty-pocketed Jesus, to help him get some money out of his brother? No, sorry, it doesn’t work that way. You can’t use Jesus for your own purposes.

Kind of reminds us of the time that Martha told Jesus that *he* should tell *her* sister to get off her lazy tush and get in the kitchen! Not going to happen. Martha’s agenda for Mary didn’t align with God’s plan for Mary. Martha’s choice was the gift of service by providing a meal. Mary’s choice was being still before God. That wasn’t something Jesus was going to take away from her. Jesus was not going to be guilted into shaming Mary.

God can’t be used to get what *we* want. Especially when it involves controlling others. Jesus will not be manipulated so easily.

I guess we have to give this guy in the story credit for brashness. Blunt honesty. No deep questions. No request for healing. He just wants money. Maybe he’s broke. Maybe he’s made some mistakes. But maybe Jesus knows more than we do because Jesus offers him a story about a rich man and he calls that rich man a fool. We can trust that if this man were destitute, Jesus would have offered him a more compassionate story…Jesus offers him tough love.

So what about this parable? The rich man is not a fool for being a good farmer. There’s no shame in having a great harvest; that is something to take pride in and give thanks for. The shame in not in being successful. Jesus’ challenge to his listeners is this: if you are rich on earth, you have the opportunity to be rich toward God. The farmer has the first part down; it’s the generosity he is missing. Instead of sharing a portion of the harvest or even selling some of the harvest, the farmer keeps it all for himself. All of it. Because it is all about him. I. Me. My. The farmer’s favorite conversation partner is…no surprise here…himself! He is talking to himself, having a conversation within a conversation, and that alone makes him look foolish. The farmer says, “I will say to myself, ‘You have plenty! Eat, drink and enjoy yourself!’”

In the NRSV translation we really hear the tragedy in this man’s self-centered conversation. Verse 19: And I will say to my *soul,* *Soul,* you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ No wonder Jesus calls him a fool. He speaks to his *soul,* offering his *soul* the comforts of tangible wealth. Maybe he could offer all that wealth to his body, but to his soul?? He already has everything his body needs; what good will money do for his soul? When a voice other than his own finally speaks, it is the voice of God, delivering the somber news that he will die that night.

And there the story ends. Rich man dies without enjoying his wealth.

See that man storming off through the crowd, the one who wanted help getting money from his brother? There he goes, throwing his hands up in exasperation, angry that Jesus wouldn’t “help.” He’s shaking his head and muttering to himself, not unlike the man in the story, except that he is saying, “You’ll find someone! There’s got to be a judge who can help you!” Deaf to the caution in the story, the caution about possessions and wealth, he leaves in search of someone who can force his brother do what he wants him to do.

Jesus won’t take on the role of judge for this man, nor will he play the role of referee. He will not participate in anything that is not life giving. The money this man longs for is not the ultimate answer to his problem – at least not as Jesus sees it. This passage of scripture is often used for sermons on stewardship and generosity, on being “rich toward God.” I’ve preached that from this text. But there is so much more here for us. I think we need to seriously consider this message about how God interacts in our world. There is a real danger in trying to manipulate scripture for our own purposes, in trying to hijack Jesus for our own agendas. In denying the truth.

The man in Jesus’ parable listened to only one voice: his own. He had conversations with himself about how fabulous he was. His was the only voice that mattered. What a fool. How might his life have been different if he had listened to others. Surely his staff saw the foolishness of saving – hoarding – so much grain. Surely his farm hands saw the wastefulness of tearing down barns in order to build bigger ones. Surely there were voices suggesting other ideas. He had more than enough to share.

As do we. As a community, we have enough to share, to provide for one another. As a city, we have enough to share so that no one needs to be hungry. As a nation, we have enough – and not just for ourselves – but for others. We have manipulated the sacred text, and manipulated the sacrificial nature of Jesus’ life when we make it all about personal salvation. When the church becomes hyper focused on saving people from damnation in the life to come rather than laboring to save people from suffering now, we’ve missed the point.

Yes, we proclaim Christ crucified and resurrected, Christ transformed for the sake of the world. But we can’t proclaim that truth while ignoring the other truths he lived and taught, truths about how we treat “the least of these.” We have a crisis on our southern border. Children in cages, sick, and dying. Claims are made about our “Christian nation,” and we obsess over what may happen to fetuses that have not even been conceived, while allowing living children in our “care” to suffer and die. The bottom line is we allow this because they don’t look or talk like us. And all the while, Jesus teaches us that the ones we fear, the ones we discriminate against, the “others” are our neighbors. The ones we are to love. Jesus says “whatever you do for the least of these, you do to me.” Is a caged Christ part of our theology?

Jim Hall, writing for the Church of the Savior in Washington, DC, wrote on this week’s blog post about a conference he attended on the environmental crisis. He recalled words of a colleague, Sister Miriam MacGillis, words that are equally applicable to a humanitarian crisis: “Maybe, somehow, this trouble we’re in is right where we’re supposed to be — at a critical juncture in the grand picture of this evolving universe.” Jim adds, “If that is where we truly are, we will have to learn to walk this path from… from despair to hope. Not just once, but again and again. And we must invite others to join us. Many others. It will be the grandest adventure we can imagine!” (*Jim Hall, from Sacred Circles, Dayspring School of Christian Living Class)* If we truly could break down the walls of fear that divide us from our neighbors – can we say yes to that adventure?

To do the reconciling, healing work of God is a grand adventure, but to do it we must constantly ask the Spirit to guide us, to speak to us over and above the words we speak to ourselves, to purge us of our desires to use God for our purposes. God will not be manipulated. For you know what the Lord requires of you: to do justice, to embrace kindness and to walk humbly with God. May it be so. Amen.