

Demand and Grace

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In a new commercial for flood insurance that I have been seeing a lot recently, a family sits nonchalantly in a scene of domestic tranquility. Dad is reading the paper, the kids are watching TV, and all seems ideal except of course that flood waters are rising. And no one seems to notice, even when they and the furniture on which they sit start floating. Everyone keeps at what they are doing while the narrative voiceover tells us that most American families are ignoring the danger of flooding, that they remain blissfully unaware that they need flood insurance. The takeaway message of the commercial—in case you missed it—is made clear: Everyone is at risk!

“Everyone is at risk” has become perhaps the defining mantra of American life post 9/11. Of course, marking out historical time by talking about life pre and post 9/11 is itself a way of persuading us that we now live in a radically different world. The color-coded terrorism threat advisory scale has become one of the ways in which we are compelled to believe that we are perpetually at risk. Before you leave your house in the morning, you’ll want to check the weather forecast, get a beat on the pollen count and the air quality, and of course, check in with the Homeland Security Advisory System to see if you should throw gas mask into your car along with your umbrella! Government is no longer in the business of making citizens feel safe but in the work of scaring us silly. Be vigilant, be suspicious of strangers—especially if they look Muslim or Middle Eastern—and above all be aware that you are perpetually at risk.

The message of perpetual risk comes not just from government. Many Christian pulpiteers preach the same message, albeit with a religious twist. I have in mind Billy Graham’s standard stump sermon. At every crusade I have ever heard—and I’ve heard quite a few as I grew up watching Billy Graham on TV—there occurs with unfailing regularity, a moment in which the evangelist says, “If you were to die this evening, would you know where you stand with God? If, as you leave here this very night, you should meet with a car accident and your life is forfeit, would you be safe in the arms of God or heading to the fires of hell?” Accepting Jesus as personal savior provides you with your very own metaphysical insurance policy. Don’t leave the stadium without it.

The contrast between Luke’s Jesus and Graham’s preaching could not be starker! When the crowds start following Jesus in great number, Jesus does not issue a common one, come all invitation. Instead, He invites them to reconsider. “Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, ‘Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple.’” (Luke 14:25)

Count the cost! Don’t put down a foundation for a tower that you don’t have money to finish. Don’t be like a king who goes off to fight a war with 10,000 against an army of 20,000. Jesus questions the crowd. He asks them, “Do you know what it is you risk when you follow me?” Far from offering us insurance or even reassurance, Jesus routinely invites his followers to further risk.

Over course of the last month, those who have been following the Revised Common Lectionary have been assaulted by the Gospel of Luke. “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. All who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. And today we hear, “No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” I confess that I am brought up short every time we say, “Praise to you Lord Christ,” or “Thanks be to God” after hearing scriptures like this. When I am sitting in the pew, and not standing up here, my first thought is, “Thanks be to God...that I don’t have to preach on that!”

Just what are we doing when we say, “Thanks to be God” after scriptures such as the ones we heard this morning? Whenever we express thanksgiving for such scriptures—even when we are just going through the motions—we give thanks for receiving Gospel, for receiving Good News! But just how is the invitation to sever one’s attachment to family, security, and money supposed to be good news? Isn’t religion supposed to be in the business of providing comfort to the distressed and relief to the weary? And aren’t religious people pilloried by likes of Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris for accepting and peddling false consolations rather than face reality with sober clarity? But where is the consolation, false or real, in scriptures like these?

Putting aside the professional atheists for the moment, there seems to a strictly Christian theological problem here. The Gospel is supposed to be a message of forgiveness and of reconciliation with a God who loves us beyond measure. Isn’t that the heart of the Gospel? To know that we are accepted, forgiven, and embraced—now that sounds like Good News. That sounds like grace. The call to pick up the cross, the call to serve God rather than money sounds like a demand. Can anything be more antithetical, more fundamentally opposed, than grace and demand?

Interestingly, the critical verse at the end of this very peculiar Gospel text about a dishonest manager or steward is not in fact a demand. To put the point grammatically, the mood here is indicative and not imperative. Jesus does not say here, “You should not serve God and wealth.” Jesus is just telling us what is the case. No one can serve God and mammon; no one can be a slave to both God and wealth. It’s just that simple. Interestingly, although Jesus does not issue a demand here, I am willing to bet that most of us hear Jesus’ words as a demand. We hear him saying: You must make a choice! You must not serve money!

Why then do we hear Jesus’ words as a demand rather than as a description of how life works? I suspect that we hear his words as a demand precisely because we know in our bones that we do in fact live our lives in service of money.

I live my life worrying about how to make ends meet; I aspire to a comfortable middle class life. I want to earn tenure so that I can keep my job. I want to be able to afford my child’s private school tuition so that she can keep going to USN. I know full well that Social Security will be defunct by the time that I retire, and I am pretty sure that my 401K won’t cut it. To make matters worse, I’m still paying off my student loans. The amount of time I spend worrying about these things makes it altogether clear that my life is consumed by money matters.

But Jesus is plainly talking about far more than about individual worries and anxieties. Jesus is concerned about justice. He condemns those who lord it over the poor and heralds a coming Kingdom in which the tables will be turned. Mary knows that this

is what Jesus is about even while He is in the womb! Her words in the Magnificat are clear. In and through Jesus, Mary knows that God “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich empty away.” (Luke 1:52-53)

We live in a world in which money constrains and compromises every aspect of our collective lives. In his new book, *Supercapitalism: The Transformation of Business, Democracy, and Everyday Life*, Robert Reich argues that money so infiltrates our shared life that it sabotages and corrupts our fundamental values, civic commitments and democratic capacities. We so desperately want good deals as consumers and substantial returns as investors that we are willing to let corporations like Walmart pay absurdly low wages to its employees even though that compromises the common good. We want the corporations we invest in to perform well even if that means cutting hiring to the bone, moving jobs overseas, running sweatshops, skimping on safety or neglecting environmental regulations. We may say that we oppose such things, but in practice, what we care about is the bottom line. The consequences: Unemployment, low wages, minimal benefits, a declining middle-class and the buying and selling of democracy by lobbyists. Whether you agree with Reich’s analysis or not, he does well to show us how very much our lives are driven by the pursuit of money and how that pursuit corrupts us.

No wonder we hear Jesus’ saying as a hard word. It brings us up short not just because it gets under our skin. The effect of Jesus’ words is more like a dissection than a stubborn itch. Jesus’ words cuts us through by making it painfully evident to us just how much our energies, our sense of well-being, our sense of identity, and even our social networks are determined by money.

Money matters are awkward for Americans to talk about. Americans do not want to admit how much class determines our lives. Even though we know it’s true, we do not want to be reminded that few of us spend real time with people who make markedly more or less money than we do. We are not the happy-go-lucky egalitarians we like to think we are. No wonder then that so many American Christians reduce the Gospel to a matter of what we do with our genitalia rather than what we do with our pocketbooks. Sex is no longer a personal matter. If you want to get personal, start asking people about how they spend their money.

We hear Jesus’ words as a disturbing demand because they uncover an awkward and embarrassing truth. Regardless of our claims to piety and faithfulness, most of us live our lives enslaved to money. Is there a more laughable absurdity in American life than this—that our money says, “In God we Trust?” Jesus’ words force us to admit that that just is not operationally true. That is not how we live our lives. The truth is that we look to money to secure us against risk and the vagaries of chance and not to God. In money, we move and live and have our being.

And perhaps it is right that we look to money to secure us from risk and vulnerability. After all, Jesus just doesn’t seem interested. Those who mourn will be comforted. Those who are poor will receive the kingdom of God. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will see God, but those who seek risk-free investments should forget about Jesus and talk to their investment managers. Jesus calls us to risk it all.

And just why might the invitation to risk be Good News? When Jesus invites us to serve God rather than to serve mammon, he calls us to surrender a life centered on the pursuit of personal security, a pursuit that both disfigures who we are and distorts our

relationships. He teaches us that there is an absolute contradiction between a life that is closed in upon itself and a life turned outward. We must either pursue a life of self-protection and self-seeking or a life committed to self-giving. **Christ bids us to choose between the closed fist and the open hand.**

The rewards of closefisted life are slim but desperately addictive. In a broken world in which betrayal and injury seem writ into the very fabric of things, it is tempting to look after one's own needs and desires. For those of us who have been bruised and battered by life—and who is exempt from falling into this category—it seems foolhardy to live another way. The invitation to openhanded life not only sounds harsh but even impossible and utterly unrealistic, all demand and no grace.

But openhanded life is grace indeed because it is a life in communion. The closed fist can neither embrace nor be embraced. It can neither console nor find consolation. It is cut off from community. The meager pleasures of closefisted life can only be enjoyed in isolation. The openhanded self is another self entirely from the closefisted self. Or put it even more precisely, it is no-self at all. It is what emerges on the other side of dying the great death, of dying to self. We discover the no-self of the open hand only after we have crucified and find that it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us.

We who are gathered here in worship are a people in transition. The fierce and tender love of God is making us over into a people of open hands. We are a people who are only now learning how to let go. We are only now how learning how to die. We are a people whose fingers have been disfigured by years lived in clinging and grasping. For people like us, the love of God is bound to feel like the painful and harsh demands of a merciless physical therapist whose rigorous restorative regime feels utterly ruthless, something that will take us beyond our breaking point. Stretch! Relax! Stop fighting it! Open up! Let go!

And that of course is precisely the call of the Gospel. That's the demanding call of the Good News! Surrender a life lived in pursuit of self-protection! Come die to yourself! Give away all that you have, all that you think is yours, all that you believe will keep you secure! If that is the invitation that lies at the heart of the Gospel, is it any wonder then that divine love confronts us as demand!

Is it safe to live an openhanded life in a closefisted world? On this front too, Jesus does not spare us the truth. Unflinchingly, he tells us that such a life is always cruciform. He tells us that our way of life will inevitably come into conflict with those who feel threatened and unmoored by our calls for justice and compassion. If we live our lives in openhanded service to the least and the lowly, we will eventually find on our hands and feet the wounds of crucifixion. Christian life is just not *grace on demand but the rather the grace of demand.*

Will the Gospel always feel like demand? Might it be that even in this life that demand will more and more feel like grace, more like a tender embrace than a burning flame? I am not yet sure how to answer that question. My best guess right now is to refuse the alternative between the flame and the embrace. I hope you'll forgive me for this, but my perverse mind turns to the lyrics of that great secular hymn by that high priest of rock and rock and roll, John Cougar Mellencamp. I'm thinking of course here about, "Hurts so good." Love, both carnal and divine, is never tame and never safe. It is both embrace and flame. It is a demanding grace and a graceful demand. What I do know is this: Even now, as we open up into the fullness of God's love, we open up also into the

deep and abundant life for which we were made. It is a love that has always surrounds and permeates us though we remain too curved in to notice. Like heliotropic plants, we theotropic creatures are created to bend toward the energies of divine love. In the light and flame of divine love, we grow into maturity and abundant life, as we are made over into Love itself. There is no way around the fact that resurrected life lies on the far side of crucifixion but the alternative is really no alternative. Any wonder then that the Eucharist—the very heart of Christian life—is both a memorial and a wedding feast, both death and life, both demand and grace! Amen.