

“Can’t Buy Me Love” or “Why Is Jesus Angry?”

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Exodus 20:1-17

John 2:13-22

When I imagined and planned for this service, I toyed with the idea of artfully setting the Communion Table on its side, with offering plates tipped over and money— monopoly money, or maybe my family’s glass jar where we put our pocket change at the end of the day— scattered about. For good measure, I imagined setting my dog’s old training crate on the floor with its door ajar, with some loose feathers remaining inside. But something told me that for Jane Wilson’s last month as a local at our church, the best way to honor her might be to NOT mess around with the worship space she has tended to with such love and care for decades.

Still, even without a dramatic and chaotic worship scene, I hope you catch on to how unsettling Jesus’ behavior was in that place where people came to communicate with the holy. Jesus the peacemaker; Jesus the meek and mild; Jesus who turned the other cheek. Where did *that* guy go? Unsettling, yes... but maybe a little satisfying too, that Jesus could sometimes catch a wave of fury and just ride it to its end. If you have ever felt yourself rage to the point of slamming a door, and—mad as you were to do such a thing— still felt a glimmer of delight at that physical release, then this passage is for you. How very human of Jesus.

When someone is mad like that, my reaction is to assume *I* did something to cause it. But I think that Jesus’ anger isn’t personal. It is broader than that. He isn’t angry at any particular person, not even the merchants in the Temple marketplace. Jesus is angry at the whole system of treating God’s presence, favor, mercy, and love like a commodity that can be bought or sold, mediated by animal sacrifice, and by a building that has become more important than the Holy One the people seek to encounter there. God’s love cannot be bought.

But how does God want to be loved? We can turn to the Ten Commandments to see God's intentions for how we can love God, and love one another, best. In the first Jerusalem Temple, at the center of it was the Holy of Holies, and in that sat the Ark of the Covenant— a cart that held within it the tablets inscribed with the covenant God made with Israel back in their time in the desert. It was believed that God's glory rested upon the Ark, and only the High Priest could enter that sacred space— and even he was only allowed to do so once a year, on Yom Kippur, to offer sacrificial blood and incense. In the second Jerusalem Temple— which stood during Jesus' time but was destroyed again about 37 years after his death— the Ark had gone missing during the time of Babylonian captivity. But the threshold of that sacred room, which still represented the presence of God, was not to be crossed except in the most extreme of circumstances.

But the people knew what their covenant with God said, and did not have to enter that most sacred space to access it.

Covenant, in the biblical sense, is not so much a legalistic measure of rules. Rather, it is the laying out of what a relationship will look like. Really, it is a statement on love: how to love God, and love one another. The ten commandments look at the relationship between Israel and God in the first through fourth commandments: You shall have no gods before me; you shall not make an idol to represent God; you should not take God's name in vain— or in Will Smith parlance, If it's not for respectful purposes, *Keep God's name out of your mouth*. The fourth commandment asks God's people to save one day of the week for rest, as a tribute to God, because God rested on the seventh day of creation. Jews count Saturday as their Sabbath; Christians— except for Seventh Day Adventists— see Sunday as the Sabbath, because Sunday is the day that Jesus rose from the dead, and creation started anew. We use the Sabbath to honor God, but God also gives it as a gift to us: an act of love to remind us that rest is good for the body and the soul.

The next 6 commandments deal with our relationship with one another: Honor your parents. Now, this can be hard for those whose childhood was shaped by trauma. It can take time to recognize when parents cared through their own experience of trauma, and have compassion for them.

Do not murder. Jesus later takes that a bit further, and suggests that instead of having avoiding murder as our baseline for loving relationships, we investigate our anger, too.

Be faithful to the covenant you make in marriage.

Do not steal.

Do not spread lies about your neighbors.

Do not be consumed by desire to possess what your neighbor possesses.

Apparently, this was a problem even before the internet tried to sell us everything imaginable.

Now something interesting happened after the Israelites first received these ten commandments. There was “thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking,” can you imagine that? And when the people witnessed this, “they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.’” And so, “the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.”

I find it remarkable that this is the response from Israel to God’s proposal for how God’s people might be in relationship with God and with one another: The people stand back, at a distance, and send only a messenger– Moses– to speak in that thick darkness where God is. Was God was hoping for something more than that? I wonder how it felt to be God, in the thick darkness, with only Moses who would have the courage to visit God.

It’s not that the people didn’t try to love God back. They did. They followed the Ten Commandments– when it was convenient for them. They also showered God with gifts to show their love, or to beg for God’s mercy. Depending on whether it was a thanks offering or a guilt offering, a ram, or a couple of turtledoves, the people believed, would send a pleasing scent to God’s nostrils and remind God that the people loved God, and dedicated things that were precious to God. These gifts, they believed, could broker some kind of favor with or rewards from God. But did God want something more?

I believe so, which may be why God eventually called Prophets to share the messenger to God's people. The prophets certainly said so. They taught that God's love can't be bought or sold. "I hate, I despise your festivals and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies! Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them,
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals

I will not look upon.

But let justice roll down like water

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The prophet Amos reported this word of God. I hear in this prophecy not judgment, and not anger. What I hear is God's longing to be loved in ways that are meaningful to God, and to God's people. I hear loneliness from God, because the people keep pushing gifts toward God but they don't really *know* God, and cannot bring what is closest to God's desire. Jeremiah delivered this promise from God: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." Here is a God who does not want to remain in the thick darkness, where only Moses and certain priests or prophets might meet God. Here is a God who wants to come out, and be known.

As Christians, we believe that in Jesus, we are given a way to know God in a more intimate way. And yet even while Jesus walked the earth, people failed to recognize that here was God reaching out to us, ready to be known, in bodily form so that we can relate. If Jesus offered a more direct connection with God through very body, but the people were focused on today's running price for turtledoves, I can begin to imagine how frustrated he might have been.

A gift to God this season of Lent, and a way of seeing Jesus Christ revealed to us in a nearer way, is to try to love *less* transactionally– and to also receive love less transactionally.

A transaction is an exchange of favors, or effort followed by reward:

- If I bring my money to the HMart counter, I can leave with a box of beautiful Asian pears.
- If I clean my room, my parent won't be mad at me and maybe I can play video games.
- If a country pays reparations, the harms of slavery can be forgotten and we won't have to talk about it anymore.

As you can see from these examples, not all transactions are inherently bad. But as we can also see, some things cannot be bought or sold.

We still try to buy God's love, as if God is a spiritual ATM. If I pray hard enough, I will get the diagnosis I want. If I do the right things, plus teach Sunday School and feed people through Center for Food Action, then God will help me get a promotion at work. If I am good enough, then I will go to heaven.

I'm not saying you should not try to do what is pleasing to God. Please, Sunday School teachers, don't quit on us. I am not making the case to ignore the commandments or the teachings of Jesus. So please, if you feed the poor, please keep doing so! I am saying that we do these actions as a *response* to God's love, or an act of love toward God, rather than an admission price into God's mercy, favor, and love. We may find that there are positive consequences to our actions.

Know that you are implicitly loved by God. Not for what you achieve or what you earn or how you look or how many children you have or even how many times you prayed for someone else. As the Archbishop Desmond Tutu was fond of saying, when I took a class from him in seminary, "There is nothing you can do to make God love you more. And there is nothing you can do to make God love you any less." Allow a love like that to wash over you and fill you. To be loved like that: how will it shape you, moving forward in the world? How will it shape Christ's church?