

Sunday October 5, 2025

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 22 – Creation Time 5 – Worldwide Communion

Sermon: “Quid pro no”

How many of you have heard the term ‘quid pro quo’? Can anyone tell me what it means? Perhaps you are more familiar with the term ‘You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.’

Quid pro quo is Latin and literally means, ‘something for something’ or ‘this for that’. It is the language of a transaction, a transaction of gifts or favours. Quid pro quo happens where there is a power differential between the parties, that is where a higher status benefactor targets gifts at a lower status beneficiary with the intended result being the enrichment, in terms of wealth and/or power of the benefactor. Quid pro quo was the way business was done in the ancient Roman empire, and the way it is still done in corrupt regimes and institutions to this day.

When we look at the political regime to the south of us, we see one that uses, even abuses quid pro quo, uses and abuses transactional gratitude. I’ll do this for you if you promise to do whatever I command you to do in return. The transactions are not only abusive, but unhealthy and immoral and I’m sure you could think of a few other words. This is gratitude gone malignant. It is gratitude structured as debt, obligation and payback and that serves to reinforce hierarchical structures of injustice. (pg. 163 in “Gratitude” by Diana Butler Bass) The way the administration is using transactional gratitude is as a tool of control to reinforce indebtedness and inequality. All are indebted to and nobody is the equal of the Great Don. Diana Butler Bass thought that the term should be renamed “quid pro woe,” because the abuse makes us all miserable and not grateful.

[Jesus said,] “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your

place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me; put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?"

What does that have to do with quid pro quo? Just this. The slave owner has gifted the slave with 'quid' – he has provided the slave with food and shelter, perhaps even spared or saved the life of the slave. The slave is indebted to the slave owner and in return does as commanded. Why thank the slave for doing as commanded? The command is the 'quo' that he owes his master, and which, in turn, enriches his master.

"So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'" We have returned 'quo' for 'quid.'

I must admit that I struggled with this passage a little, okay, a lot. In these four verses it sounds like Jesus is saying that we owe God for the countless blessings in our lives, for salvation, even for the very gift of life itself, after all, that is how quid pro quo works. But if we look a little closer at the entire chapter, we see two things. The first is that these four verses are lumped in with other sayings of Jesus. It appears to be a random collection of Jesus' sayings, stripped of any context. And then, a little further on in the chapter Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God. "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

I'd suggest that what Jesus is trying to get at in this passage is that quid pro quo is the way the world works, but the Kingdom of God does NOT work the same way. Rather, God works for the benefit of all, with no expectation of indebtedness or obligation or payback. God works pro bono (and no that doesn't mean that God is anti-Cher because God is pro-Bono – Sonny Bono).

Pro bono is the opposite of quid pro quo and it means, literally, 'for the good, for free.' Pro bono, instead of being about indebtedness is about grace.

When we see quid pro quo at work, we can be fairly certain that the benefactor, the giver, doesn't truly understand the concept of grace. What they do understand is that it is a way to enrich and enhance themselves. Likewise, when we see pro bono at work, we know we are seeing grace at work, that we are witnessing the Kingdom of God in our very presence. When we know that we are the recipients of grace, our gratitude is genuine and not forced as it is in quid pro quo.

Next weekend is Thanksgiving, and like God's banquet table at the end of time, the eschatological banquet table, and the table which we are about to gather around here, there is a place for all and food for all. It is a table of grace and a meal that evokes gratitude in its truest sense. This week imagine a world where there is no quid pro quo, where there is quid pro no. This week imagine a world of pro bono, where the best things in life are free, things like forgiveness, salvation, and the gift of life itself.