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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA W46 (K30)
24 Pentecost (Proper 26C) 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 30 October 2016

Isaiah 1:10-18
Psalm 32: 1-7
2 Thess. 1:1-4,11-12
Luke 19:1-10

The Real Social Contract

"Today salvation has come to this house... For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." Luke 9

We need a break from the vicious self-righteousness of our current election. We need someone like the English poet John Milton to remind us that all human institutions are tainted, to remind us of our solidarity as sinners and our solidarity in glory. In the face of paranoia we must choose metanoia. That is the Greek word for repentance and it describes the way that God draws us back to our right senses again.

I suspect that a few of us might long for the days of political apathy, when less seemed to be at stake in our national elections. Today we have been made to feel as if peace, prosperity, security, family, integrity, and all the values that we most cherish are at stake.

After the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire, political philosophers had a problem. For centuries people had believed that God chose kings and that it was our religious duty to obey them. After terrible religious wars and a new sense of the importance of the individual this no longer made much sense to many Europeans.

The English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) turned this whole idea around.¹ Instead of God choosing a people and assigning them a king, he argued that we should understand government as a kind of social contract between the people and their leader. People give up their liberty (such as the freedom from taxes or to exact revenge). In exchange the ruler promises to protect both their persons and their property. If the king violates either of these stipulations of the contract, the people have the right to overthrow him.

This probably sounds very familiar to you as the philosophical justification of the American Revolution and for democracy as we practice it here today. Every election cycle we have the choice to in a sense overthrow our leaders.

I have faith in democracy, but I am not so sure that I believe in the social contract as articulated by John Locke. Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau imagined an ideal in contrast to civilization that they called a state of nature. I do not believe in the existence of this kind of anarchy. As social creatures we always exist in community. We define ourselves and become human through our relationships.²

For this reason I believe in a much more basic kind of social contract, between individuals. There are rules in each of our relationships that simply cannot be broken. When they are, the relationship fails. These rules and expectations differ. We have different standards for our three-year-old nephew and our grown-up daughter, for our husband and our daughter-in-law. We do not have the same expectations for our close friend or a business associate, for our boss or our employee, our mail carrier or doctor.

But the rules are there and this usually unspoken contract always exists. If you cross the line, you break the relationship.

Each of you can give hundreds of examples of what happens when this trust breaks down. Your real estate agent lies to you. Your father deliberately insults your husband. Your business partner steals money from you. A friend betrays your confidence. We know from bitter experience what happens when these rules are broken by ourselves or by others.

This unspoken social contract tempts us to withhold our love. Over the years a husband's insensitivity, or a wife's attempts to control her family may make them withdraw from each other. Perhaps people with rebellious teenagers understand this temptation best, but so do those with adult children who make bad choices. Your boss's insensitivity to your hard work, the stupid mistakes that your employees make because they are less invested in your company's success than you are, over time these shortcomings may make it hard to love these people.³

The most difficult secret about this truth is that we do the exact same thing – to ourselves. We see our sinfulness and shortcomings up close. Often we don't like what we see. Our love for our self is conditional.

In the play "Angels in America," a fundamentalist Mormon attorney leaves his wife to begin an affair with another man. He feels overwhelming guilt. He says what we have all thought about ourselves, "I'm a pretty terrible person Lew, I don't deserve to be loved." The word "integrity," means to be whole. We are not even at one with our own self.

This is the world we live in. We are made human by our relationships, but all of these are subject to a social contract that we might break forever at any moment. The weight of this vulnerability presses down on each of us.

This is the same world that Jesus comes to save. In Jericho, one of the most important cities along the caravan route, lived the head tax collector, a Jewish man named Zacchaeus. The occupying Roman army has given him tremendous power. He can stop anyone on the highway, anyone in the town to take their money. If that person refuses he can have that person beaten by Imperial soldiers.

The empire demands its share. But he sets the tax rates much higher and this has made him a rich man in this city. His own people hate him. He collaborates with the enemy. He steals their money. They would kill him if he wasn't protected by the Roman army. Zacchaeus may be rich, but he has broken the social contract with a vengeance. No one will love him.

When Jesus comes, crowds line the streets, but Zacchaeus isn't among them. He sits ridiculous and alone in a sycamore tree almost to remind us of his isolation. Like one of those pseudo-Mediterranean mansions in the hills looking over Silicon Valley he signifies both wealth and loneliness.

Jesus intuitively seems to recognize the people who most need his healing. He calls to Zacchaeus and stays at his house even though the people of Jericho shun Zacchaeus as a sinner. Then the amazing thing happens.

In the nineteenth century people really began studying the scientific evidence for the truth of Jesus' miracles. These scholars never considered this story even though in my experience it describes the greatest kind of miracle of all. I have always wondered about this. Jesus stays with Zacchaeus. They talk and suddenly Zacchaeus is completely transformed. What did Jesus say?

Jewish law places a ceiling on charitable giving at 20% of your *income*. Zacchaeus gives 50% of *all that he owns* to the poor. Jewish law requires that people who are guilty of fraud must return the amount plus 20%. Zacchaeus instead returns 400% of what he has been accused of stealing. God does not work on someone's heart without changing that person's actions. Money is a kind of tangible measure of our individual power. Having the faith in God that it requires to give that power away is one of the most miraculous signs of God's spirit.

This season we are asking for your yearly pledge to Grace Cathedral. There are some people who give ten percent of their income to this church (and charity). That is the goal that the Bible sets out. Others give five percent or three percent. I pray that you will examine the percentage of your income that you give to this place and try to give more. Heidi and I are still trying to figure out our budget in this new situation but we are increasing our pledge this year. In a miraculous, mysterious paradox God makes us stronger when we give our power away. You have a chance to feel this new kind of freedom yourself.

But there is one more thing that I want to say about Zacchaeus, the man who broke the social contract and suffered for it. As I mentioned earlier I have always wondered what Jesus said that night in Zacchaeus' house. Twentieth century philosophers noticed that words do not just communicate ideas. They are "speech acts," they do things. In the middle of the marriage ceremony, when the priest says, "I pronounce that you are married," this does not just communicate new information. Instead it changes who they are.⁴

Perhaps in the same way the exact details of what Jesus said that night are not as important as the simple fact of Jesus' love. Probably everyone who knew Zacchaeus withheld their love from him. Most likely he even withheld love from himself. The most remarkable thing about this story is that when Jesus loved this unloved person, it completely transformed him.

Jesus loves you too, and if you let him, he'll transform your life. Even if you don't love yourself, he loves you and longs for you to know lasting joy. There is an old story about a rural Russian priest. A successful young physicist confronted him with a lengthy argument for atheism. Finally the scientist concluded saying, "Therefore I do not believe in God." This didn't upset the little priest. He just quietly replied, "Oh it doesn't matter. God believes in you."⁵

In conclusion, regardless of who is elected on Tuesday, God believes in you. God's love does not depend on who you vote for, on any kind of social contract, on any rule that you may have violated in the past or could violate in the future. Let God's love transform you and let your love be powerful enough to transform others.

¹ See John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1690). The philosopher Thomas Hobbes introduced the idea of a social contract in *Leviathan* (1651). Jean-Jacques Rousseau developed this idea further after Locke. They all have very different ideas about the social contract that mostly arise out of their disagreement over what the natural state of human beings is.

² Another problem with this kind of ideal is that it fails to take into consideration what we already have. We are born into particular conditions, with a particular history and cultural experience. We cannot simply choose to start over again. The philosopher Martin Heidegger calls this "geworfenheit" or thrownness."

³ Edward Markquart, "Zacchaeus," helped here. See his website, "Sermons from Seattle."

⁴ John Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962).

⁵ Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Future* (NY: Doubleday, 2004), 18.