

Sermon – “Priceless”

Sunday, March 20, 2022

Scripture Readings – Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9

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Our first scripture reading, Isaiah 55:1-9, is the final chapter of what theologians have identified as Second Isaiah beginning in chapter 40. As we approach the halfway mark on our journey toward Holy week, today’s reading awakens joy within us which is stirred by the prophet’s realization that God’s mercy is freely offered to any who will draw on it. The image of the banquet is given, and God’s mercy is compared to wine and milk that one may purchase “without money and without price.” Yet it will not be forced on the person or the community; one must come for it. The imperative “seek the Lord” strikes a note of repentance and decision. All who thirst and hunger after God shall be filled. Hear now the word of the Lord.

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. ² Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

³ Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. ⁴ See, I made David a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. ⁵ See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for God has glorified you. ⁶ Seek the LORD while God may be found, call upon God while God is near; ⁷ let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that God may have mercy on them, and to our God, for God will abundantly pardon. ⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. Amen

Our second scripture reading is Luke 13:1-9. Luke continues the theme of repentance, yet he balances the warnings of God’s judgment with the promises of God’s mercy. Luke also dismisses the popular, but unworthy theology of retribution. If human beings die by the sword, by accident, or by natural disaster, it is not because God is punishing them for their sins while sparing others. Jesus declares these tragedies are not God’s doing. However, they stand as vivid reminders that life is fragile, and any of us may stand before our Maker without a moment’s notice, so why not repent today. Hear now God’s Word to each of us

1 At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 Jesus asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4 Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." 6 Then Jesus told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7 So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" 8 The gardener replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Priceless”

The text: Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy, and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Isaiah 55:1

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, we thank you for the things money can't buy. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Some of us remember Mastercard's long-running “Priceless” campaign introduced at the 1997 World Series. In it, we watched a dad taking his son to his first baseball game, paying for the tickets, a hot dog, and a drink with his MasterCard. However, the real theme is the invaluable father-son bond; their relationship is what makes the experience “priceless.” The ad tugs at our heart strings with every line, closing with a tagline that still echoes in our collective consciousness two and a half decades later: “There are some things money can't buy. For everything else, there's MasterCard.”

Perhaps part of the success of this ad campaign is that it speaks what is self-evident, even in our capitalist world. From life experience we all know there are some things money can't buy. As the Beatles declared in their 1964 number one hit, money “Can't Buy Me Love!” Paul McCartney wrote the music and these lyrics one night in a Paris hotel room on an upright piano:

Say you don't need no diamond ring
And I'll be satisfied.
Tell me that you want the kind of things
That money just can't buy.
I don't care too much for money.
Money can't buy me love.

As this young romantic yearns for affection, these timeless lyrics remind us that love is priceless.

In our reading today, the prophet Isaiah also echoes the truth about what can and cannot be bought. In this expression of sheer, unmitigated joy, Isaiah declares to a people in exile, that God is about to do a new and liberating thing in their life and in the world. Isaiah declares that God is a God of mercy and grace...which cannot be bought...only freely given and freely received by those who seek God.

The invitation in Isaiah 55 is to feast on God's amazing love. Why should one waste one's precious resources on things that do not satisfy or sustain life? Israel's gracious God has flung wide the door of the banquet hall and is insisting that all who eat at the tables do so without cost to themselves. Not only this, but the food that awaits is “good” and “rich” capable of sustaining life and hope.

The ancient Hebrew's understanding of suffering changed during the Babylonian exile, when this portion of Isaiah was written. Prior to this experience, they believed suffering was punishment or payback for one's sin. During the transformation of the exile, they began to understand there was a redemptive aspect to suffering, a belief that is at the heart of our Judea-Christian faith.

In Luke's reading, Jesus addresses current events and tragedies on his journey to the cross where he will choose to enter redemptive suffering. Jesus confirms that sin is not the cause of such tragedies since we are all sinners, and, by the way, because life is fragile and there are no guarantees at any price, why not repent today and accept God's gracious invitation to the banquet.

Isak Dinesen, the author of Out of Africa, also wrote the short story "Babette's Feast," published in 1958 and turned into an Oscar winning film by Gabriel Axel in 1987.

The setting of the story is the desolate coast of Denmark where Martina and Philippa live, the beautiful daughters of a devout clergyman who preaches salvation through self-denial. Both girls sacrifice youthful passions to faith and duty, and even many years after their father's death, they keep the austere teachings alive among the small group of their father's followers who remain.

Their life changes when they welcome Babette, a vulnerable refugee from France's civil war to work in their home as a favor to one of the young men rejected by the sisters years ago. Babette, a former master chef, learns their austere dietary practices and faithfully performs her duties. The sisters are not accustomed to being served and yet eventually find Babette's presence in their lives invaluable.

Babette wins the lottery and as a way of expressing her gratitude to the sisters for such a generous welcome into their home, she prepares a gourmet French meal for their small group of followers—a priceless gift!

As the evening evolves, and the wine flows freely and generously—some of the best wine in France—there is a sense of gratitude and joy that fills the hearts of the guests. One of the guests at the banquet gives a toast. He toasts the celebration of life itself, with its losses, suffering and disappointments...lived in the embrace of God's infinite mercy. With these words he lifts his glass!

Mercy and truth have met each other.

Righteousness and bliss shall kiss each other.

Man in his weakness trembles at the choices he makes, but no...

You come to realize Mercy is infinite!!

We need only await it with confidence...and receive it with gratitude!!

Mercy imposes no conditions!!

As we continue our Lenten journey toward the cross and Holy Week and anticipate the banquet to which we are all invited, may we embrace our humanity, accept the frailty of our days, and find peace knowing that life's suffering is not payback for our sin. May we find sustenance in the gardener, whose generosity cannot be bought, who gives the fig tree a second chance, who tends its roots with nourishment, and who gives us a glimpse into the loving kindness and mercy of God...a God who graciously joined us in our humanity to redeem the suffering of the world.

A gift that indeed is priceless! Amen.

