

Good Friday
Friday March 30, 2018

PRAYER: O Christ, help us relive this day in your life that we may relive your life in our day. You went to death-the innocent for the guilty, the gentle for the violent, and the obedient for the rebellious-opening not your mouth. Now we have learned that, before our world can experience a resurrection like yours, we must experience a death like yours. Teach us how to die as you died, O Christ, that we might live as you lived-for God, enduring the cross and despising the shame.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

O God, in Jesus you became subject to us that we might become subject to you. Your reconciling presence was at work in his ministry, and not merely when he was in control, healing and teaching and preaching. It was no less at work in him when others were in control, betraying, mocking and crucifying him. This we firmly believe. We are witnesses to the gospel that you were in Jesus reconciling the world, not only after the resurrection and Pentecost, but in his rejection and suffering and death.

We thank you, O God, for revealing in him the mind you intend for us all, proclaiming through your incarnation in him the possibility of your incarnation in us. It is no more blasphemous to say we can be like him than to say he was like you. He was the Son of man and the Son of God; Jesus of earth and Christ of heaven. And he was the prophet who declared, "You shall do greater works than these."

Yet we have been slow to follow the example of our Servant Lord in suffering for the sins of others. Worse yet, we have denied responsibility for our own sins. And we have excused ourselves by blaming our troubled times. We should have thought, instead, of the troubled times of Jesus, and how that he, when friends forsook him, appealed his case to a higher court; how that he, when even that appeal brought no justice, was faithful unto death; and how that he, in death as in life, showed the way to you.

O God, when our neighbours come in search of direction, help us point them beyond their weakness to your greatness, that you might do for them through us what you have done for us through others.

BENEDICTION: O Christ, as you answered God's call to live for others, you have called us to go and do likewise. Occasionally we have, but living for others has yet to become our way of life. So we pray, dear Lord, for the vision to find this way and the courage to take it. Amen.

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John 19:16-42
“God’s Qualifier.”

I wonder how many of you remember some years back, the whole “Cabbage Patch Doll” frenzy. It happened in the weeks leading up to Christmas, when a toy company came out with those overstuffed, plush dolls, that came with adoption certificates. For some reason, the dolls struck a chord with kids all over North America, and became the number one “must have” toy for Christmas.

Well, as you remember, the demand for the dolls outstripped the supply by a wide margin, (this may have been by design by the manufacturer) and riots broke out in stores, whenever a shipment arrived. Stories abounded that year, of excitable parents, throwing fists at each other, so their little tot wouldn’t be disappointed. Some people, lucky enough, or shrewd enough to get a doll, or three, or four, took to selling them for ridiculous prices.

There have been several toys, and electronic gadgets, over the years; that have spawned similar hysteria. People line up for days on frigid streets to get iPhones, iPads, concert tickets, and discounted turkeys for Christmas, and this has all lead to some interesting responses from anxious consumers. “Tickle Me Elmo”; remember that one? It was another story that occurred just a few years back, and ever since, toy makers are looking for that “must have” toy to send kids and parents to extreme lengths to procure.

Well, I ran across a story that Chuck Swindle tells, about a toy that didn’t fair near as well; in fact, it bombed in sales. It seems there was a major department store chain, in the States, that decided to create and market a “Jesus Doll”. It’s true. They made these dolls, to apparently look like Jesus. (How they knew what he looked like, I’ll never know) They made the dolls out of soft plush material, so kids could cuddle with them like a teddy bear. As part of the package, the dolls were shipped in a satin cradle, filled with straw, like a manger. The manufacturers even went so far, as to add appropriate bible verses to the packaging.

If you are thinking to yourself, “I wouldn’t be caught dead buying one of them”, you are not alone. The “Jesus doll” didn’t sell at all. Very few were bought, even at a discount. The manager of one of the department stores was desperate to move these “Jesus Dolls”, so he carried out one last ditch promotion to get rid of them. In the front window of his store, was this huge sign that read, (I kid you not) “Jesus Christ-marked down 50%. Get him while you can.”

We might chuckle at the absurdity of such a thing, as a “Jesus doll”, or offering it at deep discount prices, but I fear that we are just as absurd, in how we think about Jesus, and what he did for us. To start with, let us admit that we tend to take Jesus for granted. Perhaps we do so, because his gift of salvation is free, and we always equate free with cheap. If for example, I offered you something 2 for 1, you would consider it a bargain.

I have even met people, who go to Costco on Saturdays not for shopping; but because they know the store will be full of demonstrators, giving out free samples. It’s like getting a free lunch. We love free things, but we erroneously believe that free equals cheap. Along that same line, we believe that if it’s free, it must not be valuable.

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I see, from time to time, old furniture, or other items at the road side with a sign on it. “Free”, it says. Take it away, if you want it. The sign, however enticing, raises suspicions in us. If it’s free, there must be a catch. There must be something wrong with it. Maybe it will cost too much to get it back to working order. Or there is some vermin living in the fabric.

Free also causes us to question our role in the transaction. Even if it is free, there must be something I have to do to get it. How many of you receive those annoying phone calls, where you pick your receiver up, and hear a cruise ship horn? Then the recorded message comes on, “Congratulations, you’ve won a free trip!”

Free! Wow! But we know better. It will cost us something. Often, we have to pay our airfare, and when we get there, we have to sit through a high-pressure sales pitch for some time share condominium. Free, hardly. Yes, free things attract us, but they also make us wary, skeptical, and it may be enough to make us turn away. So, when God offers his free gift of salvation, we hesitate, we say things like, “Well, I don’t know.”

It sounds good, but what’s the catch? Well, therein lays our confusion and our error. The gift is free to us, but it wasn’t without cost. Free, in this case, is as far from cheap as one can possibly get. The price of our salvation was extremely high; it’s just that we don’t have to pay it. Someone else has picked up the tab. Is it not wonderful when someone else picks up your tab?

A few years back, a gentleman in the Donway church and I, were out for our usual luncheon, and when we finished, the waitress informed us that the couple beside us, who had already left, had picked up our tab. Surprised? You bet we were, although the man with me said he wished he had eaten more to make the bill higher. Yes, our lunch was free to us, but it was not without cost. Its’ just that someone else paid it.

We know that it was Jesus who paid for our freedom. Today on Good Friday, we even examine, in scripture and in song, and in some detail, the terrible price he paid on our behalf.

But please don’t equate free with cheap when it comes to the cross. The cross of Christ is not cheap, or frivolous. It calls us to deep reverence, and respect. It calls us to humble ourselves, and repent of the sin that put Jesus on that cross. It is not something to be dismissed as some historical curiosity.

There was a cost for our freedom. A cost none of us could ever pay, not even over a hundred lifetimes. Our freedom cost our Lord: humiliation, torture, alienation from his friends and even forsakenness from God. It was brutal. So much so that we coined an English word out of his experience; excruciating. Reflecting on what Christ has done for us the Apostle Paul wrote this in Philippians 2:6-11.

Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself further by dying a criminal’s death on a cross.

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Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven and gave him the name that is above every name. So that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

That's what it took to purchase our pardon, our freedom. This is what it took to qualify us to become "joint heirs with Jesus". This is our "blessed assurance". How dare we even consider it as anything cheap? God's plan of salvation was not conjured up in the "Bargain Basement" of the cosmos.

It should also be said that the problem with cheap things, even free things, is that beyond a momentary surprise, they do not create in us a lasting joy, or permanently change our lives. Just ask anyone who has bought something at "Dollarama" lately.

We have come to almost demand free things in life. We bargain for them. Make decisions based on what I can get for free, but there is little joy. Even the cheering crowds on Palm Sunday were fickle in their excitement, as they went from shouting Hosannas, to calling for Christ's death. I realize that today can be, and maybe should be, a somber day of reflection, but should there not also be joy.

I was thinking about joy, when I remembered that wonderful little story, "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory". I particularly enjoyed the original film with Gene Wilder playing Willy Wonka. Do you remember what Charlie's life was like, as he lived in abject poverty, crammed into a drafty ramshackled crowded house with his mother, and his four grandparents who amusingly all shared a bed and seemed to be bed ridden?

Charlie's was a difficult life, even with his family's love. Do you remember the scene when he got his "golden ticket" to enter the chocolate factory? The look on his face, the sheer joy and excitement. He didn't deserve the ticket, nor did he buy many chocolate bars to get one, but he had one. We all have our golden ticket, which we did not earn. We know that, so where's our joy? How is the hope of our salvation expressed in our lives?

There we have it; God's free gift of salvation, purchased with a heavy price on the cross of Calvary. It is not a cheap thing, but it is free.