

“There Are Some Things Money Can’t Buy”

Acts 8:14-25

January 10, 2010

Rev. Deborah Dail

Denbigh Presbyterian Church

A man nicknamed “Peg” once gave \$10,000 to his Lutheran Church for the new organ. His pastor said to him: “Now Peg, you know this won’t get you into heaven.”

Peg replied: **“Then how much will it take?”**

There are some things money can’t buy.

In our lesson from the book of Acts in the New Testament we read of a man named **Simon** (not to be confused with Simon Peter, the disciple). This Simon was a magician from Samaria. He converted to Christianity and was baptized after hearing Philip preach. Later, when Simon saw how the apostles laid hands on those who had been baptized and how they received the Holy Spirit, he asked the apostles if he could **buy** the power to impart the Holy Spirit to those he laid his hands upon. The old magician in Simon saw a potential market for this kind of power. He also, undoubtedly saw a way to help people in their newfound faith.

The Good News Bible translates Peter’s response to Simon the magician like this: “May you and your money go to hell, for thinking that you can buy God’s **gift** with money.” **There are some things money can’t buy.** “Your money is no good with God.”

We are all prone to get confused about the whole matter of **gifts**. It’s complicated and I don’t know if any of us really get it.

A true gift is not something you have to earn or pay for. Santa Claus confuses things a bit for us. We tell our children that Santa will not bring them gifts if their behavior is bad. They have to be good to get gifts.

Translated: You have to earn your **gifts**.

Of course, not many of Santa’s helpers stick to this, but we nevertheless confuse ourselves and our children about the whole matter of gifts. **A true gift is not something you have to earn or pay for. A gift you offer to others is not something they have to earn or pay for.**

A **reward**, in contrast, is offered for good performance or some achievement of goals. Rewards are good. I believe in reward structures. But, rewards are not the same as gifts. **A true gift is not something you have to earn or pay for.**

A **purchase**, in contrast, is something you can obtain with money. Purchases are good. **But there are some things money can't buy.**

God can't be bought. God's power cannot be bought. Neither can God or God's power be earned. Further, a ticket to heaven can't be bought with a big donation to the church or earned by serving on a committee or volunteering to help others. We all try to wheel and deal God for what we want, but this is not how God works. The Christian faith is not magic and it's not up for sale.

I love what William Willimon says in his commentary on Acts. He says that Peter is emphasizing that the miracles and mighty acts of power he and the other apostles perform are indeed **gifts** of God – “surprising, undeserved, unmanipulated, uncontrollable.” (*Acts Interpretation Commentary*, William Willimon, p. 69) This is the God we worship: A God who **surprises** us . . . A God who gives us **undeserved gifts** . . . A God who is **not manipulated** by our quasi magic approaches to get Him to do what we want Him to do when we want Him to do it . . . A God who is **not controlled** by us or our attempts to make faith about **us** and not about God.

“Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, for example, says that he tried prayer and found that it did not work. He put a shoe box under his bed and prayed that it be filled with gold. He awoke in the morning and the box was empty.” Prayer didn't work! This story reminds me of one which I have told you before. When our oldest son, Austin, was little the babysitter was putting him to bed. He said his prayers and finished. Then, all of a sudden he sat up in bed and said: “I forgot to say ‘Amen.’ Now nothing's going to work.”

I read this in an excerpt from a book titled *The Way of the Word* by William Martin. “If you pray because you believe prayer ‘works,’ you are greatly mistaken. God does not jump to your command, nor is God in your employ.” Prayer is not magic and does not require magic words. Favorable answers to our prayers cannot be bought or manipulated out of God. Answered and sometimes even unanswered prayers are gifts from God. We don't control God through prayer. We surrender to God.

Alright, then. I want God. I want a relationship with God. I want to experience God's power in my life. I want to help others with God's power. I want to go to heaven. I want to pray effectively (whatever that means). I want to know how to get what I so desperately want in my life. I want to be a faithful Christian. If it's not magic, what is it? If it can't be bought, how do I get it? If I can't earn it, how do I get it?

The ad goes: "There are some things money can't buy. For everything else there is MasterCard." But is there a better answer?

There are some things money can't buy. For everything else there is . . . how would you fill in the blank?

In Isaiah 55 we read these words: "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live . . . Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near . . . For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my way, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and thoughts than your thoughts."

There are so many things money can't buy. A relationship with God is one of them. There are some things we can't earn. A relationship with God is one of them. There are some things we can't control or manipulate no matter how hard we try. God's will, God's mercy and God's grace are among them.

The Lord's Table to which we are invited today reminds us in a profound way that money and good works and magic formulas can't give us what we need most. Only Christ gives us what we need and most want. The gifts of bread and juice we receive at this table are reminders of the gifts Christ gave us in his broken body and shed blood.

If you are hungry and thirsty for God, leave your money in the pew. Leave your good works and magic formulas there, too. Leave behind your strategies for getting God to do what you want Him to do. Come to the table. With Simon, the magician, repent. Receive the gifts God has for you. Surrender to God. Open your heart to grace, love and mercy. There are some things money just can't buy.