

SOMETHING FOR NOTHING

March 7, 2010

Texts -- Isaiah 55: 1 - 9
Matthew 14: 13 - 21

Can you get “something for nothing”? In the world of commerce, the answer is an unqualified “No!” “*A fool and his money (are) . . . soon parted,*” James Howell wrote in 1629. [James Howell, Familiar Letters, October 20,1629] “*There’s a sucker born every minute,*” P.T. Barnum said two hundred years later. He made a fortune on that philosophy.

We are suspicious, and rightly so, of anyone who offers us “something for nothing.” And yet, some things in this life are free. Izaak Walton named one. “*Look to your health,*” he said; “*and if you have it, praise God, and value it next to a good conscience; for health is the second blessing that we mortals are capable of; a blessing that money cannot buy.*” Much has changed since Walton’s book, The Compleat Angler, was published in 1653. Access to good health care is a question of money in too many places, but Walton’s underlying premise remains. There are what he calls “blessings” – things which money cannot buy – in life. Without them, our lives are immeasurably impoverished. Their absence leaves a gnawing emptiness in the core of our being, one which we will go to almost any length to satisfy.

Donna and I visited with two friends during our vacation travels several years ago. Both live with chronic pain. They are mature, faithful, wonderful people, for whom every waking moment is companioned by agony. Their once vigorous lives are crippled. Every step they take is purchased at a cost almost beyond measure. They would go anywhere and do almost anything to find relief. But there is none. “*Look to your health,*” both would say, “*and if you have it, praise God; . . . (it is) a blessing that money cannot buy.*” Some of you know what that is like. All of us would do well to take it to heart and to remember that there, but for the grace of God,

go each one of us.

There are “blessings” you see, things which money cannot buy; not all of them are physical. H. G. Wells used to speak about what he called “*the God-shaped blank*” in the human heart. William James gave expression to it. “*We long for sympathy,*” he said, “*for a purely personal communication, first with the soul of the world, and then with our fellows.*” Isn’t that true of your experience of life? There is a longing in each of us for “purely personal communication” . . . another word for it would be “communion,” the intimate bonding of one with another. The ancient Hebrews spoke of it as “*shalom*,” a word we now translate variously as “peace,” “well-being,” “wholeness,” “atonement.” It is still used as a word of greeting and of blessing. “Shalom” means “may it be well with you” . . . “may God bless you” . . . “may you find peace.”

There is a “God-shaped blank” in the human heart . . . a space which only God can fill. Money can’t buy it. Fame, glory, power, prestige . . . they cannot touch it. It is this of which Isaiah speaks in our Old Testament lesson. “*Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and whoever has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price . . .*” [Isaiah 55: 1] His is an invitation to have something for nothing . . . to receive a gift pure and simple. And it is this gift which our New Testament lesson this morning describes Jesus as having acted out in a lonely place at the end of a long and tiring day.

“*Send the crowds away,*” his disciples pleaded with him. “*They need not go away,*” he replied; “*you give them something to eat.*” [Matthew 14: 15-16]

“But we don’t have enough,” they protested, and that’s what we usually say, isn’t it? “We don’t have enough . . .” And the message of the miracle which ensued . . . the message which has been consistently missed down through the ages . . . is that we each have enough and more if we will but share what we have freely. “*All ate and were satisfied,*” the gospel says;

“and they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces.” [v. 20]

There are a thousand sermons to be preached on this text, but the one for this day which has come to me is simply this –

This table is spread for you and me that we might know that God’s love is abundant and more than sufficient for all our needs. Though our bodies experience pain, and though our hearts may ache with sorrow, God’s love surrounds us. That ‘God-shaped blank’ in the human heart can be filled here. Partake. Share. Know that in life, and in death, and in life beyond death, we belong to God. There is nothing to fear.

May we experience that together on this day. Amen.