

What Can We Pay for Life?  
Psalm 19:1-10 and Mark 8:27-38  
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota  
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What can we pay for life? What is the price of the most important?

What is the cost of faith, hope and love?

At one point in his ministry, Jesus is using parables, simple sometime enigmatic stories used to share a spiritual value. These two of the very shortest parables are found in Matthew 13:

The kingdom of heaven is like a great treasure hidden in a field, which someone discovers and then covers up again, right there in that field. That person then goes and sells *every single thing* she owns to purchase that one field.

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. On finding one pearl, *the* pearl, the pearl beyond compare, the pearl of a lifetime, that merchant goes and sells *all that he has* and buys that pearl.

Like that merchant or searcher – or like a prospector in the California Gold Rush, we would give *everything* to discover the invaluable.

These are fascinating parables because they connect the deepest spiritual realities and transcendent blessings of life with Christ with the language of personal economics.

We don't always do so well connecting the two. One of our parents or our grandparents may have said, "We don't talk about money at church. Church is spiritual. Money is material. Those two don't go together."

But with all due respect to your father or grandmother, money is spiritual too. Our time and our money are all caught up in both, the material *and* the spiritual. We want the best of our lives, the best of ourselves, to become the focus of our lives, both spiritual and material.

Clif Christopher puts it this way: "I always look at asking people for money as evangelism. When I ask someone to give money for the work of God's kingdom, I am . . . inviting them to be a part of what I so passionately believe may be the best place for their money and their life. I am asking them to join me in something that *changed my life*."

That's why she sold every single thing she had to buy the field in which the treasure was buried. That's why he sold all that he owned to purchase that pearl. Because the treasure, the pearl represents life and joy and peace, faith and hope and love. God's goodness, our salvation, is worth *everything*.

Today's New Testament lesson is the turning point in Mark's Gospel. It is the hinge moment, the fulcrum point of the entire story. "Who do the people say I am? Jesus asks his friends. And then he goes further. "And who do *you* say that I am?" Peter replies, "You are the Messiah."

Those four little words are so short and small, but they cover eons of time and an infinity of distance. You are the Messiah. You are the Son of the living God. You are the Savior. You are the Teacher of life and love and goodness. You are the rock of faith and the ground of hope.

You are my all in all. You are my everything.

It's right there in the opening of John's Gospel. "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

Those four little words, those four huge words are so great, so lovely, so overwhelming that they direct our time, our energy, and yes, our money.

The truth of those four words makes all the difference. All our stories ring out in so many different voices:

Jesus is the Messiah, and he answered your prayer when your daughter was lying their unresponsive on the gurney. Jesus is the Messiah, and he gave you the strength to turn away from the bottle, and

live clean and clear, one day at a time. Jesus is the Messiah, and he showed you the way to peace, deep peace, real peace, unshakable peace.

Maybe your voice is different. Jesus is the Messiah, and he gave you the strength to go on after your son died so unexpectedly. Jesus is the Messiah, and he gives you the power today to take another step, and then another – even though every step is hard and your pain is continuous. Jesus is the Messiah, and he makes a way for you even when the way is dark and cold and difficult beyond words.

This is life. This is more valuable than anything.

We don't always do well talking about all this. The Gospel writers and the poets and the hymn writers say it so well, so truly, so beautifully, but we only struggle. We tend to see spirit in the ethereal, the invisible. We associate the earth and the mud and the practicalities of daily life with the material. We separate God and school, God and parenting, God and money.

But there is one language that unites the two, one word that transcends the distance we feel between God's spiritual presence and the pragmatism of paying the rent bill or the mortgage, the light bill, the vet bill.

That language is thanksgiving. That language is gratitude.

We give ourselves away – all of us, our time and talent and treasure – because we have discovered the Messiah, the son of the living God. We give ourselves with abandon because we have found the treasure in the field, the pearl of immeasurable value. We give ourselves away, knowing we can never pay for life or purchase faith and hope and love, for one reason and one reason alone:

We give ourselves away because we are grateful.

Our final hymn this morning at our 8:15 am and 11:00 am services gets it right. The poet names God's mercies, the God whose giving truly knows no ending, and then he lists just a few of the treasures, just a few of the pearls: nature's wonders, Jesus' wisdom, the costly cross, the shattered door of the grave.

All those pearls, all those treasures point us to life and joy and peace, to faith and hope and love. All those gifts lead to the climax of that first verse: *Gifted by you, we turn to you, offering ourselves in praise.*

Our offerings are always in response to our gratitude. Our gifts are always rooted in our thanksgiving.

This next year, 2019, we are asking each of you to give a little more. The session has great hopes for the coming year. We hope to continue to take care of our property in the ways that we should, now that we have made so many wonderful improvements through the capital campaign. We hope to give our dedicated staff a modest raise. And most of all, we hope to add a part-time staff member to work with our youth.

This person will work with our youth on Sunday mornings and Sunday evenings and on other occasions during the week. But we will not be able to hire this person without your generosity and commitment.

If you are not currently a giver, we ask you to become one, giving out of your heart of gratitude. If you are a giver but not currently a pledger, we ask you to become one, making a weekly commitment of five dollars or ten dollars or whatever represents you best. If you are a pledger, we ask you to increase your pledge by ten percent. This would enable us to hire a youth worker.

Let's celebrate the ways we together were willing to dig deeper and give generously to Imagine the Future, our capital campaign. Those financial commitments have been honored in so many ways. In every corner of the church we see the results.

Now is the time you can continue that commitment, perhaps not digging that deeply, but slightly digging to give an extra amount to our general mission and ministry.

What can we pay for life? Nothing, for God grants it as a free gift through Jesus Christ our Savior. What is the cost of faith and hope and love? Everything, because in hearts overflowing with gratitude, this becomes our song: *Gifted by you, we turn to you, offering ourselves in praise.*