

Let's Make a Deal

I came back to the office Monday Morning and was delighted to find a present on my desk. The present consisted of a box full of antique Apple computer cables, cables to connect various old computers and laptops to vintage Apple monitors. I didn't have to wonder where the present came from. Jeremy Snyder knows of my addiction to this old equipment and encourages my habit. It's a way for us to stay connected.

The truth be told I did appreciate the gift. Jeremy was thinking of me. And, the other truth be told, I will probably never need these cables. Five years ago I would have paid \$20 for one of them, but now their value is relegated to the nostalgic. I can take one down off the shelf and proudly tell you what it was once used for, but the odds are I'll never use it again. The equipment the cables serve is simply obsolete.

This was really driven home to me several weeks ago when Alfred Corrado got his brand new 2007 Macbook Pro Laptop and asked Betty Jane and I to help him set it up. This brand new computer is sleek and fast and can do all sorts of very cool stuff. With nothing more than his new laptop and the availability of a high-speed Internet connection, Alfred can sit in his living room and talk in American Sign Language to Deaf friends all over the world. Or, he can stay connected while sitting in a coffee shop or in a hotel room--anywhere there is a wireless Internet signal. His friends can see him in motion, and he can see them.

When Betty Jane and I were helping Alfred get the computer up and running, we were talking with Stephen and Melissa in Pittsburgh. They could see us and we could see pictures of them as they were talking with us. We began by typing instant messages back and forth and talking on the telephone, but it wasn't long until we were able to hang up the phone and hear each other talking back and forth over the computer. Very cool indeed!

In the little computer museum I keep in my home basement, I happen to have the first computer I ever owned. It's a Macintosh LCII, 8 megabyte wonder, and back in 1992 that was a lot of "byte." I don't use it anymore, but I cherish it. You have to understand that I am a "string saver" from a long string of "string savers." It's the anchor piece of my collection. Would I be willing to part with it in exchange for one like Alfred's? How soon do

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you want it? "I'll ship it anywhere in the world first thing tomorrow morning!" **"Let's make a deal!"**

I want to remind us this morning that Lent is about loss, giving stuff up, making sacrifices. It's about letting Holy Spirit and Word search our hearts and lives for that which is displeasing to God or anything that hinders us in our walk with God or stands in the way of our service to God. It's about tearing down walls that separate us from each other. If we enter into this process seriously it will be very painful to many of us because we like our sins and cherish our hindrances. We like the security of our prejudices and the strange reassurance of long held opinions and fears. In some cases we don't quite see how we could live or enjoy life without them. We prefer the familiar over the future. Like a prisoner who has been institutionalized for many years, we prefer our cells to freedom. I won't deny it. Lent holds no promise to those who won't let go, but it is a different story for those who will.

The common thread that runs through our Scripture lessons this morning is described in Psalm 126:6: "Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves." The question begged by this verse is why would the sowers be weeping? What's so hard or painful about putting seeds in the ground for planting? But what if you are poor and need the bread? What if you could grind the seed into flour and make bread to last for several months? What if planting the seed involves real risk for you or for your children? What if you live by the old saying that a bird in hand is worth two in the bush? Well then, sowing seed becomes a painful frightening thing doesn't it? The harvest must be apprehended by faith, whereas seed in hand is food you can see and touch and smell and devour right now. To be sure, it isn't enough. But at least; it is something.

But the thing that has always driven the people of God is the vision of a preferred future. For the children of Israel, it was the promised land. To those in exile it was the promise of restoration to their homeland. Isaiah 43:18-20 say:

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild

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animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

To the apostle Paul it was to know Christ and to experience resurrection from death. Paul says in Philipians 3:7-11:

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

To Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, it was to experience spiritual intimacy with Jesus. John 12:3 says, "Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair."

I wonder today; what is it worth to us? What is it worth to be released from the guilt and shame of our past sins and mistakes? What is it worth to know that our sins are forgiven and that we've been given a new beginning? What's it worth to know that our lives have divine significance and purpose in this world? What is it worth to have real fellowship and friendship with one another? What is it worth to know God's love, to hear His voice, to be led by the Holy Spirit? What is it worth to be able to live in hope, knowing that our graves will not have the last word? What is worth to know that our loved ones who have died in Christ's embrace will be there to embrace us on that day we too come into His presence? What's it worth? What's it worth to me and to you?

At first, the hard work and sacrifices of Lent can seem difficult and very costly. But, as we get closer to the goal and begin to think about the blessings that await us, the work and the sacrifices pale in comparison. Paul puts it this way: He says, in

Romans 8:18: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." Paul was patient with present sufferings because he knew they were prelude to a preferred and most wonderful future. **Present struggles, future glory; Let's make a deal!**

Humbling ourselves, surrendering our religious pride, facing and confessing our sins, giving up our selfishness, letting go of prejudice, forgiving those who have wounded us, handing over our addictions, exchanging our own priorities for the priorities of the Lord, these are not easy things to do. But once we've had a taste of holiness and caught a glimpse of glory, it doesn't seem so hard. God is offering us a really good deal.

Even our Lord Jesus Christ came to a similar conclusion. On the one hand, it didn't come without a struggle. We remember the blood-tinged sweat and tears of Gethsemene. Jesus begged for a different plan. "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." As made clearer to us by the Passion of the Christ movie, that most of us saw last year, the physical sufferings Jesus faced in going to the cross were horrendous. And, we can only imagine the emotional and spiritual pain Jesus faced, when the sins of the world were placed on His shoulders. All that was horrible beyond description.

But part way through that prayer time in the garden, Jesus made a decision that changed our future. He said to God His Father, "Nevertheless, not my will but Your's be done." The writer of Hebrews, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, explains Jesus' decision to suffer in these terms: Hebrews 12:2 says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

It occurs to me that a great many of the decisions we make revolve around issues of personal comfort. We shop in certain stores because we know the lay-outs, can easily get to them from where we live, because they carry the products that, well, make us feel comfortable. We buy shoes and clothing because they fit well and make us feel comfortable. We seek people to hang out with who are comfortable to be with. We even choose certain foods because they comfort us. We like to be comfortable. It takes a lot to get us to move out of our comfort

zones, especially so the older we get. We decide what we will do next based on it's comfort quotient.

But Jesus was willing to sacrifice all comfort for a preferred future. For the joy set before him he endured the cross. Now that brings up an important question. What was the joy set before Him? What was so precious that he would writhe in agony, spiked through his flesh to rough hewn timbers? What glorious vision would incite Him to do such a thing, to endure such a thing? Was it the Father's smile? He already had that. Was it the words, "this is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased?" He already had that. Was it His return to heaven? That was already assured. The answer is astounding, almost too good to be true, but true nonetheless: "For God so loved the world." He did what He did for you and for me. He did it to see us forgiven and safe in the care and in the house of His Father. He did it so we could know Him and have fellowship with Him and with one another for eternity. He gave up every earthly comfort, He gave up His earthly life for you and me.

And now it comes round full circle. Are we willing to lay down that which prevents us from receiving everything that He laid down His everything to give us? It's time to make a deal and what a deal it is. He asks for our sin; we get His forgiveness. He asks for our loneliness; we get His companionship. He asks for our confusion; we get His purpose. He asks for our grudges; we get His peace. He asks for our shame; we get His cleansing. He asks for our wounds; we get His healing. He asks for our addictions; we get His freedom. He asks for our time; we get Eternity.

As our Lenten journey enters its final leg, I ask you yet again: Is there anything standing in the way of you receiving what Jesus died to give you? Is there anything holding you back from living the life He wants you to live? Is there anything you have been holding on to that is keeping you from experiencing the joy of His Kingdom? I know it may be scary. I know it may hurt a lot to let it go but it's time to make a deal. He will give you joy for ashes, and for every seed you sacrifice He will give an abundant harvest.

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Sermon for March 25, 2007
Let's Make a Deal

Isaiah 43:16-21, Philippians 3:4b-14,
John 12:1-8

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