

# The Cost of Everything and the Value of Nothing: A Sermon

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4-14

John 12:1-8



When I was a child I used to watch a television game show called “Let’s Make a Deal!” I was really surprised as I was writing this sermon to discover that it is still on television. “Let’s Make a Deal!” had two premises: first, the initial premise had to do with beginning with nothing followed by having something good. Contestants would get recognized by the host – Monty Hall – for doing things like wearing ridiculous costumes or waving signs. They would then trade some insignificant personal item like some postage stamps or a silly hat to Monty Hall for something slightly better, perhaps a few hundred dollars, in order to make a deal – that’s the beginning with nothing part– and the something good part was that they would win what was behind the curtain or the door, which might be something valuable like a new automobile or an expensive vacation.

The second theme of “Let’s Make a Deal!” – and what led to the tension of the show – was the problem of what I am going to

call “genuine value” over against “apparent value.” After Monty Hall had traded something of genuine value in exchange for postage stamps or a silly hat, he would inevitably offer the contestant a choice. Would they be willing to trade their newly acquired treasure for what was behind “Curtain No. 1”? The contestant would then have to make the hard choice of keeping the good thing they had just acquired for the unknown item behind the curtain. Some would keep the money, but most would choose what was behind the curtain. Sometimes the trade would be worth it – even more money or some more expensive item like a new television would be behind the curtain. However, sometimes the viewer would find when the curtain opened that they had just traded away their deal for a goat and a bale of hay. The viewer had traded something that had real value for something that had apparent value, but turned out not to have value at all.

The two themes of “Let’s Make a Deal!” are also common themes in the four lectionary readings this morning: lack or loss followed by gain, and real contrasted to apparent value.

The setting for both the Isaiah reading and the Psalm would be Israel’s exile in Babylon following Nebuchadnezzar’s conquest in 605 BC, and then the permission given by the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great in 539 BC that allowed Jews to return to their land. The Isaiah passage speaks of God’s doing something new: “Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing” (Is. 43:19). The prophet speaks of plenty in the midst of want, a path in the midst of the sea where no path should exist, a way in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, drink for God’s chosen people. The desert is a place of scarcity, yet the passage recalls the story of the Exodus when God gave a path through the Red Sea when Israel was pursued by Pharaoh’s chariots, when God gave Israel water from a rock in the wilderness. The prophet is promising a new Exodus, that Israel will be delivered from exile in Babylon, and return to their

own land. As Israel was in captivity in Egypt, so Israel has been exiled to Babylon, but a return from captivity is promised. The Psalm parallels Isaiah in speaking of a restoring of the fortunes of Israel; weeping is compared to sowing, and joy is the harvest of weeping. In both cases, want precedes plenty, and the promised plenty is more valued because it follows great want.

In Oscar Wilde's play *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the character Lord Darlington defines a cynic as someone who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. In the gospel story from John, this describes Jesus' false disciple Judas perfectly. The story takes place during Passover week, and the previous verse indicates that the Jewish leaders have put out a request that anyone who knows where Jesus is should let them know so that they can arrest him. Jesus and his disciples are at a dinner at the home of his friend Lazarus and Lazarus's two sisters, Mary and Martha. Mary has just broken a very expensive bottle of perfume and anointed Jesus' feet with it. Judas complains that this extravagant gesture is wasteful. The perfume could have been sold, and the money given to the poor. Jesus' response is that Mary has anointed him for his burial. The irony of course is that before the week is over, Judas himself will betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, money which presumably could better be given to the poor. Judas is the one who will provide the information the Jewish leaders are asking for, and will lead those who will arrest and crucify Jesus to the Mount of Olives where Jesus will be praying with his disciples.

John gives us two very different examples of how to respond to Jesus' upcoming death. By anointing Jesus in advance of his burial, Mary has shown that she understands the true value of what is about to happen, but also the true value of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet anticipates the way that Jesus will later wash his disciples' feet at his Last Supper. To be a disciple of Jesus

is to be a servant. In contrast to Mary, Judas shows that what he cares about is the immediate apparent value of the perfume, but has completely missed the real value of who Jesus really is and what his death will mean and accomplish. Judas's misplaced sense of value also results in his missing the crucial point that following Jesus involves being a servant. Judas so completely misses the point that only days later, immediately after Jesus washes Judas's feet as Mary had washed Jesus' feet, Judas will leave Jesus and the rest of the disciples to betray Jesus to his enemies.

Finally, we turn to Paul's letter to the Philippians. If the Old Testament passages focused on the themes of loss followed by gain, and the gospel passage focused on the contrast between apparent and true value, the epistle contains both themes. The central theme of the passage is the contrast between real and apparent loss and gain. Paul repeats some version of the contrast between loss and gain three times: "Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss." "I count everything as loss because of the worth of knowing Jesus Christ." "I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order to be found in Christ" (Phil. 3:7-9). Paul closely ties this theme of contrast between loss and gain to the theme of the loss of that which is only apparently valuable followed by the gain of that which has true value.

In Philippians 3, Paul provides a short autobiography. In terms of structure, the outline of Paul's story closely follows the outline of Paul's account in the previous chapter of Philippians 2 of Jesus' own self-emptying in the incarnation, followed by crucifixion, but then exaltation in his resurrection. Although Jesus was in the form of God, he emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant; he humbled himself to death on a cross, but God exalted him by raising him from the dead and giving him the name above every name. Similarly, Paul had renounced his status as a righteous Pharisee; his goal is now to share in Christ's suffering, and

to be conformed to his death. He wants to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and thus through Jesus' resurrection, to attain the resurrection from the dead.

Loss followed by gain. Real in contrast to merely apparent value. What do our lectionary passages have to teach us about these two themes, and how might they speak to our current cultural situation?

It is sometimes said that we currently live in a post-Christian culture. We're told that this makes communicating the gospel more difficult, but if the culture is different, human beings are the same. Karl Marx dismissed Christianity by remarking that religion is the opiate of the people. In these early years of the twenty-first century, we can honestly say that opiates are the opiate of the people. Modernists (especially those influenced by Kant) used to complain that Christianity is self-interested; it is about "pie in the sky by and by." However, modernism never anticipated what would follow its own collapse: post-modern consumerism. When modern people finally abandoned modernity, they did not follow Nietzsche and become nihilists; they went shopping. Just like every culture before ours, post-modern people care about loss and gain. And they prefer gain to loss. They don't want pie in the sky by and by. They want it now. However, just like every culture before ours, post-modern people have trouble telling the difference between things that have real value and things that have only apparent value.

As a way of reflecting on our lectionary readings, I am going to suggest three ways in which post-modern people confuse apparent with genuine value. And how it makes us miserable. First, contemporary people are obsessed with status. The current President of the United States likes to divide the world into two categories: winners and losers. If you're not a winner, you're a loser, and no one wants to be a loser. Celebrity culture is an obsession with status that can be gained or lost in a minute. Just think of how quickly someone

in recent months has gone from being a cultural icon to being a pariah, from being the “latest thing” to becoming a “has been.” It has become a truism that checking your *Facebook* status is about “status” in more than one way. Why did this post not get “liked”? Do my *Facebook* friends get more “likes” than I do?

The lectionary readings this morning give us a very different understanding of status. No one wants to be a “loser,” but it is evident from our lectionary readings this morning that Christianity is a religion for losers, not winners. The Old Testament readings begin with Israel being held in captivity, having been defeated by their enemies, and now living in a foreign country, far from their home. As Psalm 137 states, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” In the gospel reading, Mary has just poured a bottle of expensive perfume over Jesus’ feet, but Jesus’ response makes clear that this is not a moment of celebration. This is an anointing for burial, and by the end of the week, Jesus will have been crucified on a Roman cross, the most humiliating way in which one could die in the first century. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23).

In the epistle reading this morning, Paul is anything but a “winner.” He is in prison, literally having lost everything he owned. He once had enjoyed what would have been considered status, at least for a Jew in the first century. He brags that he is a circumcised male, a member of the tribe of Benjamin; he had been a serious Pharisee who had kept the Jewish law in every way, and had even been so zealous for Judaism that he had persecuted the church. Now however, he states, “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss . . . I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish” (Phil. 3:8). However, what makes the difference is not that Paul has lost status, but that he has found a different status; he counts everything as loss for the surpassing value of knowing Christ

Jesus as Lord. He has suffered the loss of all things in order that he might gain Christ and be found in him.

So what makes the difference? Christians worship a crucified God. In the previous chapter in Philippians, Paul describes the incarnation of Jesus Christ as a renouncing of status. Jesus, who existed in the “form of God,” emptied himself, and took on the form of a servant. As the Creed says, “For us and our salvation, he came down from heaven.” Paul draws the logical conclusion from this: “Have this mind among yourselves which was in Christ Jesus . . .” (Phil. 2:5)

So the gospel provides a status that is based not on our own personal achievements or other’s acknowledgments of them – which can change in the flash of an eye – but on grace, something we do not have to achieve but can only accept as a gift. Our status is not something earned, but something given us in Christ. Paul’s status does not lie in his own achievements, but in being found in Christ, “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:9). Or perhaps even better, as some more recent commentators argue, a righteousness that depends on Christ’s faithfulness. Our status rests on what Jesus has done for us, not on what we ourselves have done or failed to do.

If post-modern people are confused about the nature of true status, of what actually constitutes “winning and losing,” they are also confused about the difference between genuine and real value. One of the most prominent characteristics of post-modern culture is our obsession with consumerism, with owning the latest electronic gadget, with driving the right car, and living in the right neighborhood. Jamie Smith has pointed out in his various books that the shopping mall is the new temple of American culture. As with status, consumerism tells us that our self-worth is based on something we do, not only our social position, but the things we own.

The problem with consumerism however is that it is based on a lie. Advertisers know this. The whole point of advertising is to make you dissatisfied with the stuff you already have in order to get you to buy the new stuff that you don't yet have. But then when you buy that new stuff, you're being set up by consumerist culture to believe in six months that it is no longer good enough. And the cycles goes on. No matter how many times you trade what you have for what lies behind curtain No. 1, you always end up with a goat.

Consumerism is also based on the false premise that suffering can be avoided. If I can purchase enough of the right things, I will never want, I will never be without. Consumerism is a kind of attempt to fight off our own insecurities and our fear of death by laying up supplies. If I have enough things, I will never have to worry about loss. Yet ultimately we all lose this fight. Everyone dies. And, as the old saying goes, "you can't take it with you."

In this post-modern world of consumerism, we are all like Judas. We know the price of everything, but the value of nothing. When we look to the epistle reading this morning, Paul points us to a different set of values. Like the contestants in "Let's Make a Deal," Paul also has traded something, but not something insignificant for something better. Rather Paul has traded everything – "I count all things as loss" – for the one thing that matters – "to gain Christ and be found in him" (Phil. 3:9-10). Unlike consumerism, which places us on a constant treadmill of never being satisfied and always wanting something more, Christianity invites us to trade the one thing that we cannot keep anyway for the one thing we cannot lose. As Jesus asked, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (Mark 8:36)

For the third characteristic of post-modernism, it is a little more difficult to provide specific examples – because it is the absence of something rather than the presence of



something. If nothing else, modernism was utopian. Modernism promised a better world, and that world was just around the corner. Eventually, modern science and modern education were going to solve all of our problems. There was a popular song in 1969 called "The Age of Aquarius." It promised that we were on the verge of an age of "Harmony and understanding/ Sympathy and trust abounding/ No more falsehoods or derisions/ Golden living dreams of visions." I cannot imagine anyone writing a song like that today. Post-modern people may not be cynics, but they also have no optimistic hopes for a significantly better future. In 1992, Bill Clinton ran for President as the political candidate who was the "Man from Hope." Barack Obama ran on the platform of "Hope and Change." But Hilary Clinton only promised "I'm With Her," and Donald Trump looked backward: "Make America Great Again." Once bitten, twice shy. A cat never sits on the same hot stove twice.

Here also the Christian way of looking at things provides a genuine alternative to post-modernity's lack of cosmic hope. Christianity provides ground for hope because those who are "in Christ" can know him and the power of his resurrection. Looking at the Old Testament lessons, I pointed to the theme of loss followed by gain. That theme finds its ultimate fulfillment in the resurrection of Jesus. The gospel is about a new Exodus that results in eschatological hope, a hope not simply for this confused world that does not understand the difference between real and apparent loss and real and apparent gain, and too often does not know the difference between apparent value and real value, but a genuine hope for a renewed creation, a hope in which real loss is followed by the one real gain.

Christian faith thus provides a genuine alternative to the vagaries of post-modern culture; in terms of status, by post-modern standards, Christians are "losers." We worship a crucified Savior. Yet, grace provides a real alternative to status. We do not need to obsess about personal status

because, to paraphrase Paul, we can abandon our own status as so much garbage. Rather, we find our status in the cross of the crucified Jesus Christ, whose true status was demonstrated when his Father raised him from the dead.

Christian faith also points to a different source of value than the short-sighted grasping of consumerism. In taking on our humanity, the incarnate Jesus Christ emptied himself and became a servant, even to the point of dying on a cross. Consumerism attempts to avoid suffering, yet ultimately fails because we all die. Of course, suffering is not good in itself. However, not just any suffering, but God's suffering in Jesus Christ is the path to life. As Paul writes, to share in the sufferings of Christ leads to the resurrection from the dead.

Finally, Christian faith provides grounds for hope, not an "Age of Aquarius" or the "Hope and Change" of political candidates, but a genuine eschatological hope not simply for this life, but for the entire cosmos. Jesus' resurrection is the promise of resurrection and re-creation for the whole universe. Christians can then face disappointment, loss, and suffering without despair. Because of the gospel, we know the difference between real loss and apparent loss, between real gain and apparent gain, between real values and apparent values. With Paul, we also count all things as loss for the sake of being found in Christ, of sharing in his sufferings, but also in his resurrection, as we hope for the time when he will wipe away every tear from our eyes, when death will be no more, and there will be no more mourning or crying, or pain, for this old world will have passed away, and Jesus will reign wherever the sun does his successive journeys run, his kingdom stretch from shore to shore till moons shall wax and wane no more.