

Getting Price Conscious

Exodus 3: 1-14

Matthew 16: 21-26

Cheap things don't get much attention from us.

Lose some coins in the sofa? Is it worth the effort to pull out the cushions *right now* and gather them up? Or would it be better to let them stay there until you actually clean the sofa and then get pleasantly surprised?

On the other hand, if the price of gas is 3 cents cheaper a couple of miles away, would you be willing to spend the time and gas-in-tank to get the better price which might save you 40 cents at the pump, but how much in time and gas, netting you what?

You may not be doing such calculations in your head like I would. Frankly, it's rather silly since it's so little that we're adding up, so little impact on our wallets. The amount of effort – for normal people – isn't worth it; the price is puny.

Now if you're buying a house or a car or a vacation or a college education, the price tag matters a lot. You'll spend generous amounts of time and money doing your homework, calculating the costs, looking for reviews, visiting the location a few times – personally or virtually – to continue assessing your purchase, even if it means prying the car salesman off your ankles as he tries to get you to make a deal *right now*. You don't want to make a mistake on this item, because the cost is steep, the investment is substantial, and there is a lot riding on getting this decision right. Screw this one up and it's going to be costly to get out of it.

Another life lesson we've all learned is that you get what you pay for. If it's something valuable, expect the price is going to be commensurate. If the price is cheap, then you're getting something cheap. You don't expect quality items at a dollar store. If you want something worthwhile, you have to be prepared to pay the price.

We get a mixed message when it comes to Christian faith matters. We know from hearing me say it repeatedly that God is ridiculously generous with an abundance of good gifts that come to us as a matter of love and grace. It seems like the marketplace in God's economy is totally messed up, clueless about supply and demand, neglectful about profit-taking, indifferent to inventory and even valuation. Nothing is clearly marked with a price tag, at least not like a normal department store.

However, as we read scripture, we become quite aware that there is a kind of price tag, and that can be rather disturbing.

A Jewish baby boy gets floated along the Nile and Pharaoh's daughter plucks him out and brings him home to the royal household. He gets a royal name: Moses.

Moses grows up, discovers (somehow) that he's a Jew. Unlike most Jews who are slave laborers living in concentration camps, Moses hangs out at Pharaoh's palace. But

Moses intervenes in a fight, defending a Jewish worker getting beaten, and kills the Egyptian overseer. Even palace peeps aren't allowed to murder Egyptians. Rather than face the music, Moses goes on the lam, exiling himself in distant Canaan. You realize how often God's chosen ones are either arrested or fugitives in one form or another, right? It's a pattern that God's chosen ones ought to expect when they get called.) Moses gets married and works his father-in-law's flocks as a shepherd, living a quiet pastoral life in absolute nowhere.

While Moses is counting sheep to stay awake, God has been deep asleep. Awakening, God is by some noise. Lo and behold, God's people are crying out from the brutality of their enslavement and oppression in Egypt. God rubs the divine eyes, plucks some wax out of his ears, and after a strong cup of coffee remembers his covenant with Abraham. (Remembering also implies forgetting.) Anyway, God decides it's time to act.

Moses is out shepherding when he encounters a burning bush. Suckered in by the novelty, he comes close by to check it out. Bear in mind, it's a burning bush, not ferocious forest fire as many seem to portray it in graphics. The burning bush isn't all that remarkable frankly. While the text has clearly been edited more than a few times, one editor notes the presence of the "angel of the Lord" that appeared to Moses in the flames. However, that editor didn't change what came next which has Moses saying that he's intrigued by how the bush isn't burning up, with no mention of the angel. Besides, when Moses goes over to the burning bush, the angel is nowhere in the text again. Rather God speaks directly to Moses.

God pipes up: "Moses! Moses!" Moses replies, "Here I am!" God tells him to come no closer – this is holy ground and this is the God of your ancestors talking. Moses must be getting anxious now.

God relates how he has seen the misery and suffering of his people, the Hebrews, and how the Egyptians harshly oppress them. God intends to rescue them and bring them to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, a land currently occupied by several powerful tribes. Moses thinks, 'Whatever.' Truth be told, Moses doesn't really care. It isn't his concern, right? He is definitely not interested in some big, new adventure.

Then God drops a bomb; "So now, go" Moses looks around to see who God is talking to. "I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt."

Moses realizes that God is actually issuing this command *to him*. The text has Moses saying, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring your people out of Egypt?" Moses might also have reminded God, "I am only one man and Pharaoh is emperor of the greatest and most powerful empire in the western world right now. And for another thing, God, you may not realize that I left Egypt in a big hurry and I am in no hurry to return and get tossed into prison or get executed. I'm sure, God, you can find *someone* else. You are **God** after all."

God isn't budging; "I'll be with you all the time. And when you bring my people out of Egypt, bring them here to worship me."

Moses tries again: "Suppose I go and say to them, 'God has sent me,' and they ask, 'What God? What's his name?' Then what do I say?"

God tells Moses to say, "*I am who I am*; tell them *I am* has sent me."

God and Moses continue this back-and-forth. God has gotten this idea and it falls to Moses to be the one who gets the call to serve, to fulfill this utterly nutty idea that one guy (and his brother) is going to challenge the most powerful ruler on earth, tell this ruler what to do, *and* succeed.

What's the price for Moses? Risk *everything* and be faithful to God's command. The whole proposal sounds completely outlandish. Should Moses give up his well-crafted security in a safely distant land, living comfortably with his wife's family, in order to follow some out-of-nowhere inspiration of God? Considering this bizarre proposition which has no hope of succeeding, the price is absurdly high.

God does say, "I will be with you." Does that change the price point for you?

Moses' job is to be faithful. Moses discovers that, despite all of the difficulties, God *is* faithful to *his* promise. It is simply up to Moses to be faithful to God. That's much easier said than done.

Yet big things have a big price tag. On this Labor Day weekend, we should recall just how difficult it must have been for workers to organize to gain their rights for safety, security, and just compensation. There were terrific sacrifices made in order to achieve things that we take for granted today; an end to child labor, a minimum wage, a defined work week, overtime pay, and safety standards to name a few. The erosion of organized labor in the last 40 years has brought us back to the bad old days prior to the Great Depression when inequality in wages and wealth in society threatened the social fabric. It isn't on the horizon; we're there today.

If the minimum wage kept pace with the improvements in worker productivity, the minimum wage would be over \$21 per hour. The benefit of that discrepancy has gone to the ever more wealthy. Most real economists recognize that a key factor in today's extraordinary inequality comes from the decline of organized labor. Our society has yet to assess the full price of such inequality which affects nearly every aspect of contemporary society. We also haven't assessed the price tag if we don't do something about it. But we may find out before long.

Remember where we left off in Matthew last week? Peter had just earned praise for his answer to Jesus' question, *Who do you say that I am?* Peter answered *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.* Nice going, Peter. You done good!

Then the Lord began describing how he would need to go into Jerusalem, challenge the authorities, endure their wrath, and get executed, but also experience the resurrection on the third day.

Peter was feeling pretty confident now and he pulls Jesus to one side. Peter sees himself as something of a leader-like figure now. He tells Jesus, “Never, Lord. This shall never happen to you.” Oh, Peter - big mistake.

Jesus jumps all over him. “You’re a stumbling block to me.” Before, he was nicknamed Rocky, the rock on which the kingdom would be built. Now he’s being called stumbling block. That’s a different kind of rock, and a fast fall from favor.

Jesus continued, “You don’t have in mind the things of God, but the things of mortals.” I think Peter could be forgiven once again. God’s ideas *are* pretty wild and strange. Peter couldn’t fathom what Jesus was thinking. God’s plans are simply mind-blowing.

Jesus chastises Peter for taking his own counsel and speaking in reaction instead in devotion. Peter was once again led by common worldly thinking rather than faith and spirit, the qualities that had rewarded him just moments before. I’m also sure that Peter is stunned by Jesus’ acceptance of the price of his servant ministry. Jesus perceives this, too.

Jesus wants his disciples to know that this is not your typical walk about the Holy Land. Jesus is not a tour guide to all the great sights. Jesus is not your happy faced buddy. Jesus is not simply a wandering teacher and preacher. Jesus is not some revolutionary looking to bring political change. They are not going to be Jesus’ lieutenants in the new regime, or princes in a palace. Jesus says:

Take up [your] cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?

This puts a whole new price tag on following Jesus.

It also frames the question of life: Is it the getting, the cheap price, the discount store shopping spree? Or is it the giving, the service to something greater, pursuing the ideal of the Kingdom, the giving of life all the way to the cross, the ultimate price?

Getting price conscious, we may come to see that the real value of this one time experience in this life is in the giving of life, and therein lies the getting of life. It means something of greatest value is in your shopping cart, like the treasure in the field or the precious pearl, that nothing else matters except giving it all up in order to gain the real value, life as God created us to have it – to give it all away.

May such an idea capture our spirits, that we must give our life away for the sake of the Kingdom, the work of the Lord, and the new life promise that comes in the Lord. On the question of price, we're told by the Lord that it is indeed worth it.