

“Priceless”
Acts 8:9-25
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Baptism of the Lord
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When Kate and I were married 20 twenty years ago, my father decided it would be funny to provide compensation to the two pastors who officiate in the form of vegetables. To the Presbyterian minister he gave a sack of potatoes. To the Methodist minister he gave collard greens. “Since you’re from South Carolina,” he told him, “you’ll know what to do with these.” It was hard to tell whether the pastors were amused or confused since the era of paying clergy with crops had long since passed. I remember thinking at the time that it seemed like a crass way to compensate clergy, but my father didn’t agree. “Ministry has to be paid for,” he told me.

Several years ago, on Sabbatical, I traveled to a small town in South Carolina where my great grandfather served as a Baptist pastor. As the only minister in my direct family line, the Reverend Manning Austin Connors has always intrigued me. In his early forties, he became quite sick with an unknown illness. After trying all sorts of treatments, the doctors of the time recommended that he spend the summer in the healing mountain air of Asheville, NC. So he got on a train. The mountain air didn’t help and sensing that his illness was getting worse he decided to return home. He died on the train at age 43.

At some point in my genealogical research, I came across a notebook that belonged to my great grandfather. The book served as a kind of log of his travels early in his ministry: a record of baptisms, marriages, and sermons he had preached. In that book was also a record of money he received from parishioners. Mr. and Mrs. Jones - \$1. Mrs. Johnson - \$2. Mr. Smith - \$1. The amounts were small – this was the late 1800s, but I remember the financial records surprised me more than anything else. I expected to find notes about scripture, sermons, and events. But the financial stuff seemed a little too crude for the concerns of spiritual leadership. And yet there it was in black and white – a reminder that ministry has to be paid for.

So it’s surprising to hear Peter reprimanding poor old Simon for suggesting that he pay the apostles for wisdom and insight into the power of the Holy Spirit. How else is he supposed to learn? Isn’t that why we pay to send our ministers in training to seminary? And why wouldn’t the apostle charge a fair price for their services? Isn’t that why we pay clergy to lead churches?

It’s surprising to hear Peter lighting into Simon when Peter knows as well as anyone that ministry has to be paid for. The church through the ages has learned this and devised all kinds of systems in the church to pay for ministry – the pew rental system funded ministry here for a number of years before the pledge system took over: the closer the pew, the more expensive the seat.

Ministry has to be paid for. Presbyterians seem to have agreed on this point more than a lot of other parts of the Christian family. When you call a pastor, the pastor has to answer 9 different ordination questions. The congregation answers

several including “Do we promise to pay him/her fairly and provide for his/her welfare as he/she works among us?” At just about every ordination or installation I’ve attended, that question elicits nervous laughter from someone in the congregation – though never from the clergy -because it seems so out of place among promises to live the Christian faith, to believe in the Triune God. Ministry has to be paid for.

It seems to me that Simon is not much different from a traditional Presbyterian. He is, after all, a believer. The text makes that clear. He only offers to pay the apostles after he’s part of the community of faith. After he’s seen the power of Jesus Christ and accepted it. Like anyone in Acts who sees the miracles and the signs – the sick healed, the possessed freed from their torments, a diverse community brought together across language, nationality, and ethnicity – he wants to know how this Holy Spirit operates. He only asks to pay for ministry after he’s accepted the power of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.

And yet Simon is trashed by Peter and by all of Christian history. There’s a whole word in the dictionary, derived from his name – “simony” – the sin of buying and selling sacred things. simoniac – “one who practices simony.” simoniacal – “of or pertaining to the sin of buying and selling sacred things.” The Holy Spirit will not be bought or sold, Peter makes clear.

Which is a problem for the church at a time when every other kind of service has a price tag attached to it. The church is one of the few private institutions – where you can come and receive something that doesn’t have a monetary value attached to it. Imagine going to Starbucks, ordering a cup of coffee and when you ask how much you owe being told, “whatever you feel called to give.” If you go to the coffee stand you know exactly what you’re going to pay. The concert hall, the amusement park, the department store, the restaurant – everything has a price tag.

But Luke, the author of Acts, writing shortly after the birth of the church, seems to recognize even in the years when the church is an outlier, a minority religion, that those responsible for stewarding the mysteries of God, those who speak, and bless, and anoint in the name of the Most High, are a dangerous step away from trying to use those powers for their own benefit, turning the gift of God’s transformative power into a skill that can be bought and sold on the market like any other commodity.

Which is exactly what seems to happen in the church when that line is crossed. John Oliver, host of the HBO Show Last Week Tonight, highlighted some of the most egregious examples of churches and their clergy who have crossed that line.¹ Creflo Dollar, pastor of World Changers Ministries, raised \$65 million to buy what he called “the fastest plane ever built in civilian aviation” so he could fulfill the Great Commission to preach the Gospel all over the world without the inconvenience of commercial air travel. Mike Murdoch, pastor of Wisdom Center ministries, paid cash for his jet then told his followers that because he sensed so much jealousy he decided to buy another one worth three times as much. I’m sure that made them less jealous. Perhaps worse than the way some of these prosperity

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y1xJAVZxXg>

preachers spend their church's revenue is the way they raise it. "All you've got is \$1,000," televangelist Henry Fernandez says in one clip, pointing into the camera. "Listen, that's not enough money anyway to buy the house... You get to that phone and you put that seed in the ground and watch God work it out." The clergy preaching this prosperity gospel claim that their wealth is a sign of God's blessing.² But the Book of Acts would recognize it for what it is – an abuse of power.

Which is probably why Peter is so hard on Simon. "You have no part or share in this," he tells him "because your heart is not right with God." For your heart to be right with God, you've got to recognize that the power of blessing, the power of healing, the power of belonging, the power of the Spirit can't be bought. It's a total gift from God. A gift that can't be manipulated, or controlled, or leveraged. This is not magic. This is gift. Pure and simple.

It's one of the main lessons of our faith, but also one of the hardest. Imagine if, in our debates on immigration or climate change, if the land where we live was acknowledged first as a gift that does not belong to any of us. Imagine if the starting place for our discussions on violence in our city or between nations, started with an acknowledgement that every human being is a gift from God; that no human being is a mistake, but a gift to be cherished. Imagine if our discussion on guns didn't start with language of rights, but the gift of community, of human fellowship, of life.

Most of our world thinks that kind of talk is rubbish and they've got some good examples to back up their perspective. We live in a city marked by crime that has touched too many of us. We live in a world where people have to protect themselves from each other. We live in a world where control has to be exercised if you want to keep from getting hurt. Gift language is soft talk that doesn't work for people in the rough and tumble of today's world.

But I think about my great grandfather on that train coming home. There's a limit to what we can control. Most of us get four score; some much less. If you spend most of it trying to control, you might get to the end and realize you missed a lot of what's precious in life. The good things – relationships, beauty, love – those are gifts of the Spirit that can't be bought or sold, gifts that can't be managed or controlled. We bear those gifts in all of their vulnerability because they bring us and our world life. Life, from the Christian view is not the same thing as longevity.

The church is called to bear those holy gifts without price tags because we bear gifts that don't belong to us. We're "stewards of the mysteries of God" as the Apostle Paul says³, not owners. Ministry has to be paid for, but Luke seemed to believe that when the baptized understood what gift they had received – life without fear, healing that goes deep, community that crosses ancient divisions – there would be more than enough shared.

I'd like to think that Simon saw that on the day he was reprimanded. I'd like to think that one day the community recognized that his heart became right before

² For a little more erudite critique of the prosperity gospel, read pretty much any mainstream Christian journal or this Washington Post column -

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/opinions/outlook/worst-ideas/prosperity-gospel.html>.

³ 1 Corinthians 4:1.

God and that he was given the chance to lay his hands on others, and watch miracles happen before his eyes. The Spirit falling like a blanket on those whom God chooses, drawing together and community so diverse as to be unbelievable, healing taking place, love blessed. If he did, then I know he found out that none of that is magic. It's as out of control to those of us called to give benedictions as it was to the first apostles. It's not magic. It's so much of a gift that we reserve a special word to describe it - grace.