

A Good Value

Isaiah 55:1-9

The people of Israel were lost in exile, cut off from home, even cut off from God's presence. This was because they had lost the Temple in Jerusalem, the only place most of them knew where to find God. Virtually all who had once lived in Jerusalem were now dead in Babylon. Only the stories of the deeds of Yahweh and the splendor of the Temple remained amidst the all-pervasive Babylonian/Persian culture.

The people of Israel were lost. Exile had moved from their culture, their country, and their politics into their hearts, their minds, and their souls. They had become a dispersed people without a home, without a God, and without a purpose or direction. So, when the invitation at last came from the emperor that it was time to return to Jerusalem, most of the people of Israel did not go. Only about ten percent went back.

It was to those for whom exile had become their identity that an unknown prophet, a disciple of Isaiah, wrote:

Ho, everyone who is thirsty, come to the waters
And you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic, offered his version of that same prophetic idea when he addressed the United States Congress when he said, "the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart." His point was that the only way to bring lasting change in the world was through the transformation of people's motives and attitudes. All of us need to change from seeing ourselves as victims. We need to change from a posture of ambivalence to one of being co-creators of "this human world" through a fundamental change in the "human heart."

The revolution that brought about the formation of the Czech Republic, and the corresponding downfall of the Soviet military's dominance in Czechoslovakia, was non-violent. People came to believe and acted on that belief. And a nation was transformed. Parker Palmer pointed toward U.S. culture and offered us this insight:

We can remind ourselves that we have a long and crippling legacy in our own system of thought of believing in the external world much more deeply than we believe in the internal world. (*Leading from Within*, 5)

The prophet asked exiled Israel this most compelling question, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread? Your labor for that which does not satisfy?" Should we not ask ourselves the same question? Our resources—time, energy, relationships, money, and creativity—are precious and we must use them wisely.

We have exiles in our modern world as well; those who have been uprooted from home, culture, language, and all that makes hope live within us. There are victims of earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, victims of genocide in Darfur and Somalia, and victims of political repression from China to the Middle East to Latin America. There are exiles in American society, too. They are victims of racial discrimination and its latent effects. They are victims of poverty and its more subtle forms of discrimination.

There are those who suffer gender discrimination that sees many women still earning a fraction of what men earn for the same work. And some suffer discrimination due to sexual orientation, seen everywhere from the military to the church in which many of our sisters and brothers in faith still ostracize those of the Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual, and Transgender community as inherently sinful and cut off from God's presence.

There is age discrimination toward both old and young. There are those in the exile of mental and emotional illnesses: depression, bi-polar disorder, and others. There is also the quiet discrimination of being unemployed or having been a couple and now being single.

You and I can be in exile too
The Spirit drive us
 into the wilderness
 suffocating guilt
 desperate isolation
 persistent questions
 without apparent answers

We feel the sharp pain
 of lost hopes
 or broken dreams,
 victims of
 our own burning rage
 that flames within
 our own cold lakes
 of fear
 of frustrations that
 suddenly boil over

We know the ache
 of loneliness
 of alienation
 that penetrates
 all the way through us

What can we do?
Ancient peoples cried
 screamed to heaven
 "how long this pain?"
 "how long this exile?"

Today we cry
 "are you even there?"
 "do you even care?"

And the God says
 you have to choose
 on what you rely
 where you place
 your trust
 how you shape
 your life

(©Jack Price, 2010)

Many of you know, I like to watch westerns on Saturday morning television. It makes an easy way to get into the day. But sometimes, there's not a western on in the morning. If I'm patient,

sometimes I find there's one on later. It can be a nice accompaniment to doing chores or even working on a sermon. Yesterday, *Dances with Wolves* was on. It's the story of a Union soldier John Dunbar who, after the Civil War, volunteers for an assignment in the far west. He arrived at the outpost to find there was no one left. The post abandoned, but he decided to stay. He built a relationship with a native American tribe. Through a variety of circumstances, he found his true identity in that relationship, stating it something like this:

At last I found who I was. The name John Dunbar has ceased to have meaning for me. More and more, I recognized myself in the repetition of the name the tribe had given him: *Dances with Wolves*.

In the biblical library, perhaps no event held as much pain as the Babylonian exile. In the depth of that experience, the book of Isaiah voiced an invitation from God to a people thirsty for identity, hungry for a home, and desperate for a sense of meaning in life. That invitation is also a challenge to us to purchase that which will truly meet our needs and satisfy our deepest hunger and thirst. In today's world, we hunger and thirst for many things, but face the challenge to spend our *money* for that which really satisfies. But what will ultimately satisfy? There is no alternative to choosing what we really want, what we really need--than choosing what will satisfy.

How do you determine a good value? What will satisfy your deepest needs? Can we afford to spend capital on what does not really work for us? What is the real cost of choosing foolishly? In the business of food, it seems that fast food is a bargain. You can buy a lot of filling food for a small amount of money. But what is the true cost of that cheap food? What is the cost in terms of our health and the cost of healthcare in our country? How much does cheap food really cost? The key is to know what you want, know the real cost, then spend it.

What will you give to find your own soul? What will you do to claim your authentic self? Is any price worth it for that which ultimately satisfies that need? I'm leaving this afternoon for St. Louis to attend a week of leadership training in conjunction with the More² organization of which Crossroads is a member.

To tell the truth, this is not the best time to take a week and be out of town. It's hard to spare a week away, especially this time of year. There is the cost in dollars which is not insignificant. And I'm a little nervous because there is the cost and the challenge of opening myself and being vulnerable, of examining my motives for ministry, and the values that lead me to work for social justice and peace.

It's always something of a risk to step out and try something new, but there is value in the risking. Without some risk, I would not be here with you now, would never have moved to Kansas City to become your pastor. Without paying the price for this week of training, I would miss what might well be a life-changing experience for me. And ultimately, of course, the value of this week will rest on how much I am willing to put into it. Without taking some risk, you would not be where you are today and Crossroads Church would not exist.

We give the value to our own journeys. We also give the value to our gathering as church. We do this by how much of ourselves we choose to invest: our money, our time, our struggles, our willingness to be in relationship, and our creative talent—by how much we share these things with each other. In that investment, we demonstrate how valuable it is to have space in our lives to bring our most troubling, challenging, and honest questions, to have a community in which we can trust seeking the answers that are right for each of us?

Jesus' disciples once asked him, "Where else can we go? You have the words of life?" These words of life are not theological doctrines, but shared lives and supported journeys. There is no cost too high for that which truly satisfies, There is no value greater than that which helps us discover who we are, choose where we are going, and live the journey with integrity. God calls us in our exile to embrace our role as co-creators. It is our choice how we will answer that call. Let us give thanks today for the journeys we walk and to God who fills our lives and send us to share that light with the world.

Isaiah 55: 1-9

- Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
- Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
- ²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
- and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
- Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.
- ³Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.
- I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.
- ⁴See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.
- ⁵See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.
- ⁶Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;
- ⁷let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts;
- let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
- ⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
- ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.