

“The Real Bargain”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
February 25th, 2018
2nd Sunday in Lent
Genesis 17:1-7,15-22
Mark 8:31-38

[God said,]

*“I am God All-Powerful. If you obey me and always do right,
I will keep my solemn promise to you and
give you more descendants than can be counted.”*

Genesis 17:1^b-2

Let us pray... O God,
You drive a hard bargain with us in that
we don't always get what we want.
Often, we find that turns out to be a good thing,
because you can be trusted to give us what we need for a fulfilled life.

Amen

Last Sunday, our Cruisers – church members who went on a cruise to the Caribbean
were back in church.

Bill Richter really enjoyed the ship and his time ashore
and he was particularly excited about his new green pattern shirt
which he had bargained for and got a good deal.

Now, my knowledge of this kind of interaction is limited,
but there are certain unwritten rules for the game of bargaining.
Tell me if this sounds familiar if you ever bought a souvenir in a market overseas
or a used car here...

For example, you don't walk into a shop if you don't want to buy anything,
because once you do, the merchant is going to try to sell you something –
anything.

If you see something you like – and it is something you really want, or need,
don't let on that it is important to you –
because the merchant won't budge in price and may even slip in
another piece of merchandise to make the sale.

So, you casually ask,
“How much is this...?”

Then the merchant will name a price somewhere between
extravagant and extortionate.

You have to already decide what is the highest price that you will pay –
and then go lower!

The merchant may protest that it is from their grandparents' collection
and hold out for that price, or say that you remind them of a dear relative
and make a modest concession.

Willard, p.2

You reply with a counter offer – but if it is still too low,
the merchant may say,

“I have come down, you must come up!”

At this point, you must decide if want to continue or walk out the door –
at which point the merchant will make an offer to keep you in the game
or let you go.

If they feel you are not being fair,
the merchant can stop the negotiation no matter what the price you offer.

But even after a hard negotiation,
there can be satisfaction in a game well played,
especially if the merchant says,

“You are a hard bargainer. Come back when it is not for business!”

This is how much of the world does ‘business’ –
especially in the land and times of Jesus of Nazareth.

You can see how there is excitement once you know what you are doing
and it’s scary until you figure out how it works.

It’s not really my cup of tea, but I admire the dynamics of it,
because there is a skill and a level of respect that come out of such exchanges.

We see this dynamic at work in our scripture lesson from Genesis today
when Abraham bargains with God for the sake of his son, Ishmael,
whom he had with his Arab servant woman, Hagar.

Abraham also asks God, how can it be that he will have another child
since Sarah & he are quite elderly? He even laughs about this.

Fortunately for him, he asked the right question.

When Zechariah was told that Elizabeth & he would have a son – John the Baptist,
he asked, “How will I know this?”

The Angel Gabriel was not pleased and told Zechariah
he would not be able to speak until the baby was born!

That’s how he would know.

God was generous to Abraham & Sarah and Hagar, too,
promising them many descendants, nations, and royalty –
and that has been borne out in history
with the flourishing of Jews and Muslims and even Christians
as spiritual heirs.

Israel and the Islamic countries of the Middle East,
North and Central Africa, as well as Southeast Asia
bear witness to God’s promises for cultural prosperity.

Christendom – which rose out of the ashes of the Roman Empire
and expanded out from Europe to colonize the Americas,
can also claim an indirect connection to that promise of prosperity.

Willard, p.3

The Gospel message today, however, seems to be counterintuitive to earthly prosperity and power.

Jesus – as leader of their movement starts talking to his disciples about how he will be handed over to the authorities and put to death – prompting his second-in-command to protest.

Understandably, Peter and the others had something to lose.

Jesus angrily rejects this and goes on to say that anyone who follows him had better be prepared for the responsibility and risk.

Jesus then said,

*For whoever would save [their] life will lose it;
and whoever loses [their] life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.*
[Mark 8:35]

Doesn't sound like much of a bargain – especially, for those first disciples as they considered the sticker shock for being a follower of Christ.

In the Gospel of John, a similar crisis emerged when Jesus told a crowd that he himself would be the bread from Heaven that they seek.

They were confused by this and as they began to disburse,

Jesus turned to his disciples and asked them,

“Will you also go away?”

It was then that Peter spoke up and said,

*“Lord, to whom shall we go? [as if to say, ‘Please tell us!’]
You have the words of eternal life;
and we have believed, and have come to know,
that you are the Holy One of God.”*

[John 6:68^b-69]

The crisis for Jesus, then and now, is, “Will the disciples get it?”

Jesus asked,

*For what does it profit [someone], to gain the whole world
and forfeit [their] life?
For what can [someone] give in return for [their] life?*

[Mark 8:36-37]

Another way of saying this is to ask:

“Is it worth it to sell your soul – to compromise yourself, for earthly gain – but then, to have all the anxiety for security, the greedy deception, and the empty lust that goes with it?”

There is a way of looking at the world only in terms of what things cost and even looking at people that way.

For what can [someone] give in return for [their] life?

Alexis Tracton is a 15 years old freshman at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and a survivor of the mass shooting last week.

Here are excerpts from an article she wrote for the Huffington Post:

Willard, p.4

The pain that my community is feeling is vast.

*But now there's this impetus inside us, moving us to speak up
for those we have lost, because that's what they would have wanted.
That's what they would have done.*

*When you speak up, I'm learning that either nobody will listen
or the whole world will open their ears.*

*We're going to be so loud and so persistent
that the world will have no choice but to listen...*

*Still, we know that because this tragedy has given us a national platform,
our opponents will come out strong.*

*There is a polarizing gap between those who stand with us
and those who are against us...*

*Those who are spreading these lies have a following,
and some of those followers blindly disparage
[Emma Gonzalez, David Hogg, and Cameron Kasky
who have spoken up on national media]
without looking for supporting information.*

And in some sense, I can identify with [those false accusers].

*They have lost so much faith in our government that they're searching
for an answer in places where an answer cannot be found.*

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/alexis-traction-florida-school-shooting_us_5a8f237ee4b00804dfe6b136?utm_campaign=hp_fb_pages&utm_source=main_fb&utm_medium=facebook&ncid=fbklnkushpmgo0000063

God is still speaking

God is still speaking through the young people of Parkland

The young people of Parkland are finding their purpose – their mission in life;

They are standing up & speaking out, and they're going to drive a hard bargain.

The promise Jesus gave to his disciples – though they hadn't understood it yet,
was that there was more to this life than we know –

more than the suffering and disappointments,

not only 'life eternal' beyond this life, but an authentic life, now, with purpose...

*And [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and
be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed,
and after three days rise again.*

[Mark 8:31]

It was this confidence that he would give them through the Holy Spirit

that Jesus would prevail over the challenges of oppression and death

and that he could be trusted;

And they would remember and act on what Jesus told them,

“If any[one] would come after me,

let [them] deny [themselves] and take up [their] cross and follow me.

[Mark 8:34^b]

Jesus drives a hard bargain, but the followers of Christ then and now,

have believed it means for a fulfilled life with benefits that are out of this world.

Amen

*Our lesson today from Genesis 17:1-7,15-22
as found in the Common English Version,
describes God's promise to Abraham & Sarah – and Hagar, too,
for them to have many descendants...*

¹Abram was ninety-nine years old when the LORD appeared to him again and said,
“I am God All-Powerful.

If you obey me and always do right,

² I will keep my solemn promise to you and
give you more descendants than can be counted.”

³ Abram bowed with his face to the ground, and God said:

⁴⁻⁵ I promise that you will be the father of many nations.

That's why I now change your name from Abram to Abraham.

⁶ I will give you a lot of descendants,
and in the future they will become great nations.

Some of them will even be kings.

⁷ I will always keep the promise I have made to you and your descendants,
because I am your God and their God.

¹⁵ Abraham, your wife's name will now be Sarah instead of Sarai.

¹⁶ I will bless her, and you will have a son by her.

She will become the mother of nations,
and some of her descendants will even be kings.

¹⁷ Abraham bowed with his face to the ground and thought,

“I am almost a hundred years old. How can I become a father?

And Sarah is ninety. How can she have a child?”

So he started laughing. ¹⁸ Then he asked God,

“Why not let Ishmael inherit what you have promised me?”

¹⁹ But God answered:

No! You and Sarah will have a son. His name will be Isaac,
and I will make an everlasting promise to him and his descendants.

²⁰ I have heard what you asked me to do for Ishmael,
and so I will also bless him with many descendants.

He will be the father of twelve princes,
and I will make his family a great nation.

²¹ But your son Isaac will be born about this time next year,
and the promise I am making to you and your family
will be for him and his descendants forever.

²² God finished speaking to Abraham and then left.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Mark 8:31-38

- 31 And [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things,
and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes,
and be killed, and after three days rise again.
- 32 And he said this plainly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him.
- 33 But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said,
“Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men.”
- 34 And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them,
“If any[one] would come after me,
let [them] deny [themselves] and take up [their] cross and follow me.
- 35 For whoever would save [their] life will lose it;
and whoever loses [their] life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.
- 36 For what does it profit [someone], to gain the whole world and forfeit [their] life?
37 For what can [someone] give in return for [their] life?
- 38 For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words
in this adulterous and sinful generation,
of [them] will the Son of man also be ashamed,
when he comes in the glory of his [Abba] Father with the holy angels.”