

"For What It's Worth"
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
November 11, 2018

1 Kings 17:8-16
Mark 12:38-44

Do you remember the ad that ran for many years, "There are some things that money can't buy. For everything else, there's Mastercard." The ad would run up a bill: for example:

A pair of tickets to the Yankees game: \$300

2 hot dogs and a bag of peanuts: \$30

Yankees #1 Fan Foam Hand: \$8

The look on your child's face when he catches a foul ball: Priceless.

The ad seems to tell you that you can create the kinds of experiences that make life meaningful, and indeed, priceless, by spending your way to get there-- preferably by using Mastercard.

Adweek magazine reports that the Priceless campaign has been successful for over two decades, even through the radical shift in how we consume media in the digital age, because of one truth that is universal: experiences matter more than things.¹

I spent the last 2 days in Chicago to be with my best friend from seminary, Erik, because a terrible storm last summer caused me to miss my flight to attend his mother's funeral; Chris and I made plans to spend time with him instead months later, knowing that sometimes that is when the grief really

¹ Raja Rajamannar, "How to Create a Campaign That Spans 2 Decades, Like Mastercard's 'Priceless'" in *Adweek*, Dec. 21, 2017

sets in. We did something very fun while in Chicago; we went on a double date to a celebrity chef restaurant we had always wanted to try but could never get a reservation. The restaurant was all about the experience; for example, when they marched out our dessert, they gave each of us what looked like a balloon but which was in fact apple taffy pumped full of helium; to eat it, we had to kiss the balloon so that it would deflate into our mouths and we could chew on its tart sweetness. As we each did that, we also inhaled a good bit of helium so that we were each talking like chipmunks in the formal dining room. It was certainly an experience we will not forget, but yes, indeed: we made sure not to forget our credit cards!

It was a good time for sure. But I also understand at some level, it did not matter if we ate out of a pizza box, as we did our first night there, or out of a Michelin-starred restaurant. What is priceless is being with friends who have loved each other through thick and thin, and being able to give comfort and joy to one another in the face of great loss.

Our two lectionary stories, both about widows who have faced enormous loss, look at the value of money. In the gospel story, the widow's two copper coins are contrasted with what we can assume are the more sizable donations of the scribes. In Jesus' comparison to both, he shows us the point of their spending is not how much gets spent but rather how their gifts reveal their experience of God.

Once I received a gift that, looking back, I realize may have helped me experience God. I have shared with you that during my childhood and adolescence when I lived with my mom, we struggled with poverty. My mom did not have a college education, and had never expected to have to raise kids by herself. She struggled with depression and anxiety without the support she needed. She was in and out of jobs, and life got really rough when she was unemployed. When I was a young teenager, things started to spiral. I remember a season when Mom had been out of a job. I remember when creditors, including Mastercard, would call to collect bills, I

would answer the phone and try to find a way to hold them off, knowing my mom did not have money to pay them and so did not want to talk to them. They were like vultures circling over a weak and dying animal. I remember having the power turned off, and making the best of the fading sunlight coming through the windows before we would just make it an early night to bed. I remember getting the eviction notices, knowing that any day they would come for our things. I remember the walls pressing in on us and my mom and me feeling powerless.

What did my mom do while we were living under such stress? Well, she took me shopping. We went one evening to the mall. Knowing her credit cards were maxed out, and that her bank account was depleted, she took the last \$30 in her purse, and we went to my favorite store. To the rhythms of the mall soundtrack I tried on clothes, feeling their fabrics hug my body. I looked in the mirror and the mirror looked back at me, and I could also see in the reflection my mom smiling with pride as she admired me in these clothes. Somehow, I always felt more beautiful when my mom was looking at me. I could see the satisfaction on her face that she was able to give me something new, as well as an evening of distraction from the walls that were still pressing in on us.

I know it wasn't wise. Even as we were checking out, I'm pretty sure I was aware of the foolishness of spending the very last cash she had. "Are you sure?" I asked her, but she urged me to put the clothes on the counter as she fished the last bills out of her wallet to hand over to the cashier. There was just enough change left to get burgers and coke for dinner in the Food Court. I remember bringing my cup of soda with me on the car ride home, knowing it wouldn't be my home for much longer. As we rode back I danced my straw between the ice cubes as they melted slowly in my waxed paper cup, not wanting the drink of this last supper of this life we shared together, as we knew it, to ever end.

In the face of the enormity of challenges coming at my mom, she knew that her \$30 could go to creditors towards the interest on a debt that would never be paid. Or, that \$30 could go towards giving us one last good memory together before we would lose the home we shared, and I would go live with my dad, which I did, and she would go stay with her sister until she got her feet back on the ground. You may call it foolish. You may call it irresponsible. You certainly would not put my mom on the budget or the endowment committee of our church. But today I ask that you suspend judgment and try to see how *loving* that act was. She poured out all she had left-- not only the \$30, but also the last stores of energy of a depressed person-- so that we could share together an evening of connection and joy, and so that those burgers and coke we shared could become a feast of milk and honey or even bread and wine, promises that sustained us until that day yet unseen when we would feast together again. She took all of the meager amount of what she had and spent it on me.

I feel the same mixture of gratitude and discomfort at the widow as I watch through the gospel's words her walk to the temple treasury and deposit her two small, copper coins. Jesus said it was "everything she had, all she had to live on." Part of me wants to tell her, "No! Save that money for yourself! Buy a half a piece of bread and enjoy one last meal, or save it in case someone donates two more coins to you, and you can have a whole loaf of bread, so you can eat half today and half tomorrow."

But the widow made her choice of her own free will. She gave that money to God. Perhaps she remembered the story of the widow of Zarephath, and how God cared for the widow by replenishing her oil and meal until the famine was over. That story gave her courage to hope for things not yet seen, and to be generous.

The writer of Mark knows how futile that poor woman's gift was; Mark was written after the destruction of the Second Jerusalem Temple in the year 70

CE, almost 40 years after Jesus' death. And in the next chapter of Mark, which we will hear next week, Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple.

Here we have this woman giving everything to an institution that will be gone in a matter of years, and yet Jesus takes notice of her. She has given the Temple the last of her life, and the Temple's life cycle is almost over. However, when Jesus looks over at the scribes in their long robes, and the best seats of honor, he realizes the Temple is not doing what God's mission requires. I am sure the scribes were responsible with money. You could probably count on them to balance the checkbook without going into the red. But a woman who gives everything will go on being poor because these same scribes devour widows' houses rather than caring for the poor. That makes the scribes' gift worthless, and the widow's gift priceless.

Noticing the widow's sacrifice, Jesus, perhaps aware of what must happen next, is realizing that his mission will require that he give all of himself to God's call, and it is a pathway that will lead towards him losing his own life.

God's love has that kind of foolish extravagance. Our wealth has no meaning or worth if it does not serve the purpose of love. Amen.