

The Best Deal for a Dollar

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February 16, 2014

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

3And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 2I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, 3for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? 4For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human? 5What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. 6I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 8The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. 9For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

Matthew 5:21-37

21"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' 22But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Most of us like a good deal. This past Christmas, I was in search of Christmas decorations. I made my way from store to store to find the best deal. Eventually, I arrived at the place where I needed to find some gold balls which would hold up outside. I could not seem to find the right sleeve of balls were all of one color whether that was at Walmart, the Christmas Tree Shop, K-Mart or Lowes. It was the last thing I needed to make my decorating scheme complete.

As I was making my way up Shelburne road trying to figure out what to do, I spotted the Dollar Store. I did not really think I would find what I was looking for at such a cheap place but I thought I would give it a try. So I went into the store and low and, behold, there was a whole display of plastic gold balls. Better yet each sleeve was only one dollar. Amazing! Since I had saved a little money, I also bought some plastic ties which only cost one dollar. Spending one

dollar was a welcome relief after spending many more dollars on other Christmas stuff. One dollar for gold Christmas balls and plastic ties. Magic!

Now comes the true confession part of this story. I never quite had time to use those gold plastic balls this year. Out in the cold, I did make one attempt to affix one of the gold balls on to the lighted garland decorating my house with a plastic tie on. Unfortunately, the ties were really cheap. They became brittle in the cold and broke in two when I tried on one of the balls with one of them. But hey what do you expect? Those things only cost a dollar.

Whether we care to admit it or not so many of us shape our lives, consciousness and identities around getting the best deal. We are conditioned to be closet wheelers and dealers. We turn on our computer in the morning to check out our bank balance. We show up at the store with a fist full of coupons and scan our shopper card to see what deal the grocery store will give us on English muffins. I personally like the buy one and get two free deal. Some of us carefully count out our allocation for food stamps for the month. The stamps will cover this but not that. Or maybe we pay in cash or with our credit card so we can get airline miles. And when it's all done the clerk hands us the receipt and announces we saved 10 cents a gallon on gas. Yes!

As we bring home the groceries, we switch on our televisions and watch what the Dow is doing. Is it up or down? We watch the mail to ensure our disability, pension or Social Security check arrived on time and is the right amount. If we manage an organization be it a business or a not-for-profit or a church, we keep our eye on the profit and loss statement. Are we up or down? We look at the medical statements to see what our insurance covered and what we have to pay. We check our pledge statement to be sure we are on track. We then fill out our tax forms to see how much we have to pay or get back. Then there is Turbo Tax which promises us a \$2500 refund if we buy the software. Just when we are done with the taxes, we fill out the financial forms. And on it goes. This is life. But if we are not careful, we can begin to think that life is all about what's going on with our bank account.

We think the one dollar deal speaks to our deepest need. We clamor so to speak to lay our money and our consciousness on the altar of market economy which continues to measure our worth by what we can make and contribute. But Jesus said that when ever we offer our gift on what ever altar we worship at, we must first remember a great truth: That truth is as follows: if our brother or sister has something against us, we must leave our gift there before the altar. And then we must go and be reconciled to our brother or sister. It is only when we are reconciled that we may return to the altar and offer our gift.

Money becomes one way to gauge the quality of our relationship with God and one another. Indeed, the use of money is part of what makes us human. Embracing the incarnation means embracing our material world which is created by God. It is one way to know God. But as we chase off to the Dollar Store to save a few bucks on Christmas bulbs or obsess about the stock market, we need to ponder who we might be running over on the way to get our best deal. It's possible, in all our dollar monitoring, that we get lost and we can forget what and who is the most important.

The other night it was such a pleasure to go to celebrate with the Ronald McDonald House which has resided in our old parsonage next door for 30 years. At that event, we heard stories of love, where that house provided very inexpensive accommodations and a nurturing

environment for families who have children in the hospital who are very sick. As I listened to these stories, I thought about my own children and what I feel like when they are sick even for a short while. As would be the case for any parent, it would completely terrify me if my child had a serious medical diagnosis which is life threatening and is in the hospital for days on end. A deal on golden Christmas balls and plastic tie clips for a dollar would be the farthest thing from our mind. Such a ridiculous obsession if you think about it. I think about how we mindlessly go through life placing our gifts on the altar of whatever we worship while our families or our neighbors, or perfect strangers are struggling with something much more significant and eternal.

The most important thing in life is the quality of relationships we have with one another and with our brothers and sisters around the world. Whatever money we offer is in service to that relationship. It is through the act of caring and reconciliation that we discover a richness which cannot be adequately measured by our stock portfolio.

If I can return to Ronald McDonald House for a moment, I imagine many of you are aware now that we lease our old parsonage for a small sum. Just one dollar. It has been so for 30 years. On a superficial level, being my cheap, mortal and market economy driven self who easily succumbs to the ministrations of the Dollar Store, I think about that property and the money we could make if we rented it to a night club or an insurance office. But if I ever I get in that space, I remember practically, that if we rented the parsonage we would have been on the hook for a couple million dollars of renovations which have made the rent hardly worth it.

But far more important than these temporal matters, I think about who I see walking in and out of that house. This last summer, I looked out the window and I would often see an Amish family dressed in their customary black attire making their way in and out of the house day after day and week after week. I wondered to myself about their story which I imagined to be very serious since that family was here for so long. Was their child dying? Did he or she have Leukemia? Was the child born prematurely?

I never knew their story. I doubt that that they would ever show up in our church or give us a dollar. But as I watched that family go in and out of the house all I could feel was an immense feeling of gratitude that the house is here day after day and year after year to offer generous help. As they say, "it is the house that love built"

If I may, I heard about another story. It was another family from London who stayed at Ronald McDonald House here several years ago because they had a child in the hospital.

At the dinner, they testified on video tape from London about how this church community cared for them and included their kids in our youth programs when they were struggling. Unfortunately, we also one of our pastors had the sad duty of doing the funeral for that child who did not survive. That family testified to the care they received.

When we offer our care in this way, we reconcile ourselves to our brother and sisters. In our reconciling activity, in our giving, we participate in a new sort of economy. We participate in God's economy. Together when we are generous and engage in reconciliation to bind up the broken hearted, we touch the heavens.

In Paul's letter, Paul addressed a congregation which was quarreling with one another as many frail and human organizations, including the church, are so often prone to do. We are a

broken lot. Sometimes quarreling in church occurs because, as people of the flesh, we end up worshipping things which seem to bring us security but which fail us in the end. But the health of our church is always rooted in the realization and truth that we are God's servants working together. Together we become God's field and God's building. Our grounds, our buildings, and all that we have been given ultimately belong to God. We give what we can according to our labor. Together and individually, we encourage our neighbor by enriching their lives spiritually and materially by using the gifts we have been given and placing them, not on an altar, but at the feet of our brothers and sisters through out the world who are hurting] and are in need of hope.

Together as a faith community we glorify God with our generosity of funds and generosity of spirit. In so doing, we discover an amazing richness in life and become true instruments of reconciliation and peace in Christ's name. If we can't be that instrument of Christ in our community and world, then we might have a full bank account but our hearts and our church would be empty. And that's not such a good deal, is it?