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Isaiah 55:1-9

PRICELESS

Perhaps it is because I have been going through the college admission process with my own son this year that the recent story in the news about wealthy parents buying their children's admissions into elite colleges really captured my attention. These wealthy parents, who hold prominent positions as CEO's of major companies as well as some Hollywood celebrities, participated in a cheating scandal that included bribes, cheating on college entrance exams, and creating false athletic profiles of their children in order to get athletic scholarships for sports their children had in fact never played. Of course, this scandal is terrible for so many reasons. It is terrible for the way it deprived deserving students of placement at these colleges. For each student who cheated his or her way into these elite school, another student, a student who had worked hard at both academics and athletics, was denied acceptance. But what these parents did was also terribly harmful to their *own* children. Some of these children reportedly did not know what their parents had done until the scandal broke. Imagine thinking that your own abilities had earned you a place at that school only to learn that your parents had so little faith in you that they fraudulently bought your way into the school. These parents deprived their children not only the right to succeed on their own merits, but also the important opportunity to learn how to handle failure and disappointment. For those parents who involved their children in carrying out the fraud, the lessons they imparted to their children included lying, cheating, and the message that money can buy you what you want in life. Everything is for sale, if you are willing to pay.

But that is not only the belief but all too often the reality that already exists in our society and world. Those who have money can get what they want. The rich can get better seats on

airplanes. They can get bigger houses and nice cars and take nice vacations. They can use their connections which money offers them to get good jobs. Money definitely offers an advantage in getting into colleges, even when parents follow legal avenues because the wealthy can send their children to private high schools that have all kinds of resources to ensure their success, and can pay to have their children privately tutored in preparing for the admissions exams.

Many of us here today who are not among the super wealthy, have nevertheless reaped rewards that come from having a middle class income. Our money has enabled us to save for retirement, bringing us security in our older age. Our money has allowed many of us to buy our own homes, giving us a financial advantage for later years, and enabling us to choose to live in safer neighborhoods or those with better schools. Money has ensured we will get good medical attention when we need it. Money has bought us many advantages in life: security, comforts, health, and stability. We have come to accept that the finer things in life can be had but for a price. Everything has a price.

Even *we* have a price. When family members received financial compensation for their loved ones who died in the 9/11 attacks, the amount of money they received was based on the victim's earning potential. So the widow of the minimum wage restaurant worker in one of the towers received vastly less than the spouse of the corporate executive, reinforcing the message that our worth as individuals is based on how much money we earn.

Or maybe the color of our skin. History as well as social policies reveal that lighter skinned people have been and are currently considered more valuable than darker skinned people. As darker skinned people have attempted to immigrate to the United States, our president lamented why there couldn't be more immigrants from places like Norway. Other factors influence the way society assesses human worth: whether a person sits in prison, whether

they live in certain neighborhoods, whether they have gone to college, whether they are on welfare, use drugs, or are gay, lesbian, or transgendered. In this commercialized, profit-driven culture, our value is assessed by how we can make money for other people. Do we buy their products or can we be enticed to buy their products? Everything has a price. Even us.

And that is why it is surprising, even shocking, when we are given something important and valuable for free. In today's reading from Isaiah, God is giving away a lot for free. I love the way this passage begins because it invites us to imagine God as a street vendor calling out to folks as they walk by. "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!" But instead of trying to make a profit, God is giving it all away for free. God calls out, "Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." It's all free. Free water. Free wine. Free milk. This divine street vendor invites people to eat not just junk food give-aways, but to feast on the rich foods that only the wealthy and privileged normally get to eat. And it is all provided by God for free.

Who doesn't like free food? Such news would have been a powerful message to the community Isaiah wrote to, his intended audience. The people he wrote to were living in exile in the foreign country of Babylon. Far from their beloved home, they had no doubt suffered and struggled to get by. They had witnessed the disparity of wealth between themselves and their Babylonian captors. They knew what it was like to not have money to buy things. But when Isaiah writes to them, the people are on the verge of being released from their time of exile and allowed to return home. And as they prepare to leave their exile, Isaiah brings to them a message from God about their homecoming. It is a time for making a choice. Will they feast upon the rich food God is going to offer them--the blessings of God's love, God's forgiveness, God's pathway of compassion and justice, the kind of food which offers nourishment to the soul--or

will they cling to the junk food values they learned while in exile, the values of the empire in which people are commodified, life is about getting what you can seize or buy, security is found in possessions, and one's worth is based on status. As people scurry by the street cart where God is offering up rich and wonderful food for free, as they scurry by in their frantic efforts to get ahead, chase down prosperity, grasp success and power, God asks them, "Why 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. Incline your ear and come to me, listen so that you may live."

What God is offering is the gift of life. God invites the people to come home and eat the blessed food that will spiritually nourish them for a full and abundant life. The invitation is given because sometimes people opt for exile rather than for home. Exile is when you are cut off from your home, forced to be somewhere that is not your home. But exile is also a spiritual and mental state. And sometimes we opt for exile rather than home. We may not be captives to a foreign government, but we can find ourselves in mental and spiritual exile from our true home as we become captive to the systems that shape our culture and world. God warns us that the bread of the empire we chase after will never satisfy us. And it is always costly. The parents involved in the college admission cheating scandal believed that certain schools would offer something important, something valuable to their children and they were willing to pay the price. But instead of taking their children to a place of genuine value, their true home, these parents bought into a system that leads to exile, estrangement from the place of genuine well-being. "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?" God asks. "Come to me; listen so that you may live."

What God offers is priceless. It is so valuable it cannot be sold. Think about it. When things are for sale, some things become more valuable than others. There are different prices to reflect the different values of items. But God's blessings are offered for all without price. God's love is not for sale and we are not for sale. You and I are priceless to God. The high school drop-out and the college professor. The mom on welfare and the CEO of a company. The volunteer who tutors kids and the prison inmate. Both good and bad, poor and rich, we are all priceless to God and we are all are given the blessings for free. Even mercy is free. Isaiah calls people to forsake their bad ways and to return to God because God is full of mercy and will pardon them. Mercy for people who have done something wrong never seems fair to those of us who have tried to do right all our lives. But God responds, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways."

Lent is a time to come home. It is a time to walk away from the exiles we have been living in--the mindsets, the attitudes, the striving, the priorities and values that can never satisfy us or offer meaning to our lives--and to return home to God. The nourishment we seek to sustain us on this earthly journey is freely and lavishly bestowed upon us by a God who loves us no matter who we are, what we have done, or how lost we may have become. Because to God, each one of us is priceless.