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Palm Sunday, March 28, 2010

Sermon Texts: Isaiah 50: 4-9
Matthew 21: 1-17
Philippians 2: 5-11

Sermon Title: "What Price Love?"

Sermon Topic: Palm Sunday

Sermon Purpose: To teach the need to follow Jesus' example and give ourselves in service to others.

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Sermon Prayer: God of love and patience, grant us the understanding of your Word and your Way, as we seek the find guidance for our lives, by following our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. In His name, we ask it. Amen.

Out in this harsh and unforgiving world of ours, there are those who all-too-eagerly put a price on love. There are those who seek to market something that bears a superficial resemblance to love. Far more common, though – and more insidious – are those daily emotional transactions in which many of us become enmeshed, within our own intimate relationships.

It's easy for grown-up people, who ought to know better, to practice some kind of accounting for services rendered. There's what the lawyers and politicians are fond of calling a *quid pro quo*.

What I'm speaking about is a kind of scorekeeping approach to family life that can poison intimate relationships. Every act of kindness, every favor performed, every expression of affection, comes with a price, which is the expectation that, one day in the not-so-distant-future, it will be reciprocated in time. If too many days pass by without a reasonable number of corresponding gestures, then resentment begins to build. Hostility rears its hideous head. In time, the breakfast table, the family room, even the bedroom, becomes a battleground.

That's what happens when you put a price on love.

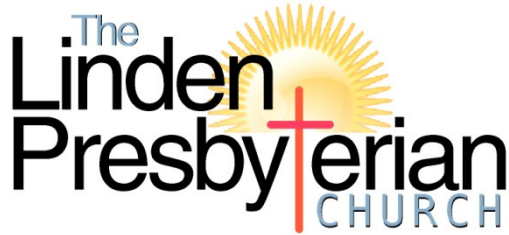
Kenosis

Jesus never put a price on love. That's one thing that was absolutely and utterly consistent about his life, as we read about it in the gospels. He never demanded anything in payment for the love he extended to others. He always offered the gift free of charge and without any expectation that the gift would be reciprocated.

In Philippians 2: 5-11, the apostle Paul portrays just how wondrous a gift this is. It's a famous passage known as the *kenosis* passage – from the Greek word meaning, "to empty," which figures prominently in these verses.

Jesus cast aside the equality with God that was his birthright and emptied himself of everything the world considers to be of value. Jesus "had it all," being co-eternal with God in heaven. Yet, in coming to earth, he left it all behind.





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Victims of certain natural disasters, like Hurricane Katrina, have had this experience – as they lost homes, possessions, jobs, everything. Many of those hurricane refugees found it to be a profoundly disorienting experience – to end up in a shelter with nothing, but nothing, remaining from their former lives. A few of them even lost their identification.

Who were they, then? What status did they have? What was their place in the world? They had a human body and whatever soaked and tattered clothing was on their backs. Apart from rapidly fading memories of homes lost to the floodwaters; that was it.

Yet, Jesus chose this emptying. It didn't just happen to him. He chose it. He did so for us, that we might know fullness of life.

There's another place in the Pauline epistles in which we can read of this sort of self-emptying. The letter to the Ephesians contains a passage that has long been used to suggest that men are to be dominant over women, especially in marriage: "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church."¹ The writer of these words is merely reflecting the conventional wisdom of his day, the patriarchal structure of family life in the Roman Empire. That sort of hierarchical command structure is one that few today are willing to imitate, and with good reason.

Yet, pay attention to what comes next. This may surprise you: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."² Suddenly the price of love has escalated very high indeed. There is no price higher than the price paid by Jesus, in fact, in shouldering a cross and dragging it to Calvary, in being nailed upon it and watching his life's blood drain out, along with his last breaths. "Just as I have loved you," said elsewhere, "you also should love one another."³

This necessity of self-giving does not arise from nowhere. It's present in our very genes. The DNA code of both men and women contains 46 chromosomes. In order for new life to begin, the cells coming from each parent must go through a numerical process of reduction, from 46 chromosomes to 23. Without this biological process of self-denial, it is hard to imagine human life at all.

Such is God's plan for biological new life. God's plan for spiritual new life is similar. It is expressed in Jesus' selfless action in "emptying himself, taking the form of a servant." It is lived out in his instruction to "take up the cross and follow me."⁴

An eloquent testimony

John Sumwalt tells the story of a prison chaplain who learned from three brothers named Jimenez of what price love can demand. All three Jimenez brothers were serving time at the same prison in Texas. This could only mean, he assumed, that the Jimenez brothers – sons of migrant farm workers, who had never had much access to education – were chronic lawbreakers, typical dead-enders. He soon learned otherwise.

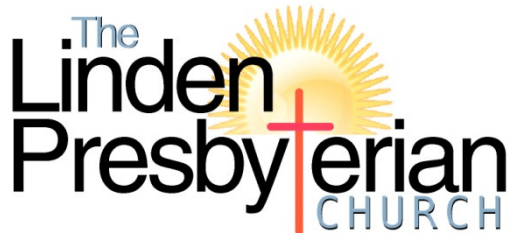
¹ Ephesians 5: 22

² Ephesians 5: 25

³ John 13: 34

⁴ Matthew 10: 38





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As he spoke with the older brother, Juan, he learned that the other two brothers were both deaf. In fact, of the original family of five, the older brother was the only hearing member of the family. Because the family was constantly on the move while the boys were growing up, the two deaf sons had received little in the way of special education. The family had been forced to develop their own kind of sign-language system to communicate with one another.

Juan's role was clear. His job was to serve as the family's intermediary with the hearing world.

Jobs are hard to come by for the children of migrants in any circumstances, but when those children are deaf, it is nearly impossible. The two deaf brothers became easy recruits for criminals searching for drug "mules" – low-level lawbreakers who transported illegal drugs. Not long after his two brothers were arrested, Juan, too, ran afoul of the law. The chaplain believed he did so deliberately, in order to stay close to his brothers.

After several years, the younger brother was released on parole. Six months later, when half his 10-year sentence had been completed, Juan, too, was offered a parole. He expressed gratitude for this offer, but refused to accept it. He told the parole officer he could not leave the prison because his brother would have had no means to communicate, and would have been unable to complete the classroom education that he had begun behind bars. Juan accepted another five years of imprisonment so he could help his brother.⁵

Juan's story is an eloquent testimony to the price of love.

As Jesus entered human life, he gave up his life with the Father in heaven. As Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he was giving up his life to help all humanity to reach heaven.

Let us pray:

How much you have loved us, Lord, and how much you have given on our behalf! Continue to weigh the price of our deeds on our hearts, and show us the way of your true love. Amen.

⁵ From a story posted on the Midrash electronic discussion group, March 11, 2006.

