

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 19, 2025
Joel 2:23-32; Luke 18:9-14

"What's It Worth?"

Back when I was about to turn nine years old, I had my eye on a bicycle that I wanted more than anything in the whole world. When I saw the Schwinn three-speed bike in the bike shop I thought my stomach had sunk to my knees. I felt light-headed and my heart was racing as fast as I thought I'd be able to ride on that bike. It was the coolest thing I had ever seen and I became determined to have that bike.

The first thing I did when I got home was check my piggy bank, which was actually a replica of an airplane made into a piggy bank that had one of those spring-loaded slots that shot the money into the bank. It was a lot of fun to put money into. The only problem was that it was also very easy to get money out of and so I was very disappointed to discover that I didn't have that much money in the bank.

I took what I had to my father and asked him if it would be enough to buy the bike and he just shook his head. "No, Mike, that won't get you a bike. You'll have to earn extra money." I talked with him about what I could do to earn extra money around the house and it became clear that I couldn't earn enough from my parents to buy the bike. I would be forced to enter the cruel, hard world of capitalism and work for other people.

That very evening, I started out going from neighbor to neighbor, offering to mow their lawn, weed their flower bed, rake leaves or do anything they wanted to earn extra money. Much to my surprise, I got several lawn mowing jobs from people who said that if I did a good job they would hire me for the rest of the summer. I was so excited that I started the next morning. From that moment on, I mowed lawns, washed windows and weeded gardens and began to rake in the money. I was excited to feel my piggy bank grow heavier and heavier.

After about a month of this surge of work ethic, I took my piggy bank to Dad and asked him to help count it to see if it was enough to buy the bike. You cannot imagine my excitement when Dad told me that I had earned exactly enough money to buy the bike - \$45.00. It was one of my proudest moments when I went with my father to the bike shop and paid for my brand new bike myself with the money I had earned.

And let me tell you that bike was worth it! I flew like the wind when I was on my Schwinn. I was the envy of all the kids in my neighborhood.

Do you remember something like my bike in your life? Something you paid a high price for? Something for which you sacrificed and worked hard? Well, the kingdom of heaven is worth that, only more so.

But we have difficulty in understanding the kingdom of heaven, so Jesus broke it down for us in parables. He never said, "Now here is the moral of this story." He simply let the story stand on its own.

That's what happened one day when he said, "let me tell you about these two men who went to the temple to pray." One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. That certainly gets the people's attention. It's hard to know which one is the villain and which is the hero. Pharisees were admired, but they were self-righteous. It's hard to like someone who is always looking at you disapprovingly and maybe even condescendingly.

But the tax collectors were imposing Roman taxes on Jewish people. That's reprehensible. On the other hand tax collectors did play a vital role in society - they were someone upon whom everyone could look down. We all need that, don't we. We don't like to admit it, but everyone except true saints looks for someone to whom she or he can point and say, "Hey, that one over there is worse than me." The tax collectors played that role to perfection.

Back to the story. The Pharisee prayed a very ego-centered prayer, "God I thank you that I'm not like other people." He enumerated how upright he was in his life, exceeding even the most rigorous rituals of Jewish laws. Meanwhile, the tax collector huddled in a far corner of the temple, cast his eyes down, beat his fists against his chest and prayed, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

Then, Jesus clinched the story with, "I tell you that this tax collector went home justified - made right with God - not the Pharisee. And I'll tell you why. Everyone who makes himself great will be humbled and everyone who humbles himself will be made great."

You and I like this story because we identify with the tax collector. We think of ourselves as the humble one who confessed that he didn't deserve anything. That's why we customarily read, teach and even preach this parable from the perspective of the tax collector.

But when we view it from the vantage point of the Pharisee, we're probably a lot closer to what Jesus intended. It wasn't Jesus' intent to make the tax collectors feel better, but rather to stir the consciences of the Pharisees - all of us Pharisees. I'm not crazy about being lumped with the Pharisee, but the truth is that I resemble him more than I like to admit.

And I suspect that you do, too. For instance, how many of us, in the midst of a crisis in our lives have muttered, "Why me, Lord?" Let's face it: this is a Pharisee question because it assumes that somehow other people deserve to suffer reversals, but we don't. We share a lot in common with the Pharisee, you and I. We are people who congratulate ourselves now and again on our moral achievements - while we read the newspaper or watch the evening news. Why can't all the world be like.....me. If it were there wouldn't be so many troubles.

So, why didn't Jesus appreciate the Pharisee's goodness and religiosity? Or, more to the point, ours, when we are like him? Perhaps it's because the Pharisee was using his religion to hold God at arm's length. God wanted a place in the Pharisee's heart; the Pharisee wanted to give God a place in the ritual. We like the kind of religion we can measure because it protects us from more demanding issues.

Take fasting, for instance. If I give up a meal or a day of food, I know what I've done, but when God says, "Love your neighbor as yourself," I want to answer, "But there's no end to that!" To which God says, "Precisely."

This journey we make with Jesus is never-ending and always changing, and constantly demanding. We can't ever be content with where we are because Jesus stands ever before us beckoning us on to a life in which we love Him with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength and all our mind. There are no halfway measures with God. God wants all of us.

Halfhearted commitment doesn't even get us halfway to fulfillment. Jumping through all the hoops of religiosity, like the Pharisee, won't get us there. Because ultimately, God deserves our heart, soul, strength and mind and not just our obligatory performance. Our relationship with God is worth everything we can put in it, and then some. And the amazing thing is that God meets us way more than halfway to solidify our relationship.

That was what Jesus accomplished in his life, death and resurrection. Jesus made up the difference between what God deserves from us and what we can offer. But offer, we must. God knows that we are attached to our possessions, sometimes more attached to them than to anyone, even God. So, God asks us to grasp our things more loosely and grasp Jesus more tightly.

I know that at this time of year the church gets a bad rap when we talk about stewardship. Being good stewards of all that God has given us is our responsibility. But some folks still come away with the impression that all the church cares about is our money. But that's really not what is at stake when once a year the church asks us (myself included) to release more of what we have. What's at stake is the truth that while we think we have our possessions, in reality, they have us.

And God wants us! God wants to know that we are on board with where Jesus is leading us. We see God's hand all over our congregation right now. Less than a year ago we were pretty dispirited, but look at us now! God is doing remarkable things with and through us. It is time for us to show our gratitude to God by giving more than we have been giving – showing God that we are excited about God's plans for us.

Yes, we are small. But size has never mattered to God – just ask David who beat Goliath. God consistently uses the least in the eyes of the world to accomplish great things. But we have to do our part, too.

This week you should have received a financial pledge form in your email. I've got mine. We would like everyone to pray about how much to release to God through Providence Church. If you have pledged financially to the church, great! Do more. If you haven't pledged, do. If you worry about uncertainty and whether you will be able to fulfill your commitment, don't worry – God will provide.

I can't wait to see what God has planned for us in the future. I'm so excited about our future together that I've told the session that I'm prepared to commit to serving with you another year starting in January because I know that God will make up the difference between what we can offer and what is needed to meet the needs of the world.

Do you remember my Schwinn bike, which I loved and cherished and for which I had sacrificed? Well, one day several months after I had bought it with my own money, (all \$45 of it) I threw something into the wastebasket and noticed a piece of paper from the bike shop. I unwrinkled it and saw that it was a bill of sale for my bike. It said that my bicycle cost \$85.

I stared at that receipt in amazement. My Dad had made up the difference without even telling me. He just did it because he loved me and wanted me to have my heart's desire. Well, you see where that illustration takes us don't you?

Our God in heaven is far more generous than my father was with me. In the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross, God made up the difference for us between what we offer and what is the actual cost of the kingdom of heaven. We can't do enough to buy or pay for the kingdom of heaven: not with our money, not with our prayers, not with our tithing, and not even with our good deeds. We can't earn our way into the kingdom of heaven; we can only be given it.

We spend our lives on things – lots of things – many of them pharisaical things done out of obligation because that's what the religious rules say we should do. But Jesus offers us a different way, a new way of living where we recognize just how loved and treasured we are and respond not out of duty but out of love and joy.

How many of us are parents, grandparents or great grandparents? How many of us would sacrifice our lives so that our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren could live? How many of us would sacrifice the lives of our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren so that others could live?

And yet that is precisely what God did for us – for you and me. That’s how God chose to make up the difference between who we are and what God deserves. Rather than simply going through the motions of life, doing what religion demands and society expects, wouldn’t we rather spend our lives rejoicing in the love of God in Jesus Christ?

So, what’s it worth.... your life, I mean? What’s it worth?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen