

# ***“Can’t Buy Me Love”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, July 7, 2013

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Theme: *“God thinks nothing of commandeering ordinary folk and giving them outrageous assignments.”* (William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol. 41, No. 3, Page 7)

Holy Scriptures: 2 Kings 5: 1-14    Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

## **2 Kings 5:1-14**

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

5: 4 So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

5: 8 But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of

Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage.

5:13 But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

### **Luke 10:1-11, 16-20**

10:1 After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.

10:2 He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.' "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."

10:17 The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!"

10:18 He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

## **Your Names are Written in Heaven**

*“Great is your reward in heaven...”*

Does that sound familiar? Help me out here.

I wonder if we saw it on the back of a t-shirt in the Peachtree Road Race last week,

like the ones worn by the couple who dressed up as Oompa Loompas?

Or maybe it was on the back of the runner’s shirt that read,

*“Pain is Only Weakness Leaving Your Body”?*

Is it common vernacular, gleaned from the pen of Shakespeare?

Remind me, please, whether this is what Alex Trebek says

to those who come in second and third place in Jeopardy:

*“Great is your reward in heaven!”*

We can see how some might hear this phrase

and decide to tune out the world and distance themselves from their neighbors,

thinking that it doesn’t matter what we do and say

as long as one believes...because *“great is your reward...”*

By now you know full well that I am not the kind of pastor

who preaches a pie in the sky religion.

I affirm with you that God planted us together, side by side,  
community by community on this beautiful blue planet,  
not to sit around and twiddle our thumbs while we  
wait for Judgment Day  
or for what we aspire to see in the great by-  
and-by;

Jesus Christ commandeers us instead to work and play, to  
give and serve,

to live and love to the fullest and best of our  
abilities and availabilities

for the glory of God.

*“God thinks nothing of commandeering ordinary folk  
and giving them outrageous assignments.” [1]*

And great is their reward in heaven.

Yet here it is,

opening itself before our very eyes,

this pearl of wisdom tossed into our midst,

a divine gesture of grace which has the  
potential

to lead us ever deeper into Christ and  
our community.

## We find this pearl of wisdom in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount:

- When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain;  
and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.*
- 2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*
- 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
- 4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*
- 5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

Jesus preached to ordinary folk that God might use them for outrageous assignments:

- 9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*
- 10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
- 11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you  
and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*
- 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,  
for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*
- (Matthew 5: 1-5, 9-12)

Let's visit this in more modern terms:

Blessed are those who practice Christian service in the name of  
Jesus Christ.

Blessed are you whose ministry of grace

is changing lives and making a difference!,

no matter how mighty or humble, whether profound  
or personal,

even if it's not popular or comes at great  
cost

or may lead to your being  
"unfriended" on Facebook

or tweaked on Twitter

or not invited to the  
best of parties or galas

or persecuted  
for righteousness'  
sake.

Blessed are you who have chosen to follow in Christ's footsteps by  
being faithful;

by being grace in graceless situations;

by loving unconditionally those whom God places  
before you;

by serving the last and the lost and the least.

Jesus says to us as we return to Him for renewal and repurposing:

*"I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning [!]  
See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions,  
and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt  
you.*

*Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you,  
but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."* (Luke  
10: 17-20)

"In other words, this ministry is much more than helping people,  
more even than healing and preaching." [2]

Ministry in the name of Jesus is transformational, miraculous, cosmic.

“God is taking back the whole cosmos through our work.”[3]

As Jesus said, *“Rejoice and be glad,  
because great is your reward in heaven...”*

We hope one day to share the glory of God,  
and that would be a glorious reward, indeed.

However, this is not why we love and serve, work and play  
in the name of the Creator, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We do so for love.

God is love.

God loves you.

May you receive and experience and bear witness

to the love of God in your life here and now, always and forever.

*“God thinks nothing of commandeering ordinary folk  
and giving them outrageous assignments.” [4]*

And great is their reward in heaven.

We find this pearl of wisdom from the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans:

*“Therefore, since we are justified by faith,*

*we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,*

*2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand;*

*and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.*

*3 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings,*

*knowing that suffering produces endurance,*

*4 and endurance produces character,*

*and character produces hope,*

*5 and hope does not disappoint us,*

*because God’s love has been poured into our hearts*

*through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” (Romans 5: 1-5)*

We dare, we have this boldness, we have the audacity, and we have the humility

to “boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.”

This hope sustains and empowers us to be sent to serve,



to endure suffering and to overcome the disappointments of life.

For millions and millions of souls in nations around the world

this hope is what makes the difference

between experiencing life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...or not.

The late Erma Bombeck wrote:

*I had a dream the other night that every volunteer in this land  
had set sail for another country.*

*I stood smiling on the pier, shouting,*

*“Good-by, phone committees, Good-by, disease-of-the-month.*

*No more getting out the vote.*

*No more playground duty, bake sales and  
three-hour meetings.”*

*As the boat got smaller, I reflected:*

*“Serves them right, that bunch of yes people.*

*All they had to do*

*was to put their tongues firmly against the roof of  
their mouths*

*and make an “o” sound--no.*

*It would certainly have spared them a lot of grief. Oh, well,  
who needs them?” The hospital was quiet as I passed it.*

*The reception desk was vacant.*

*Rooms were devoid of books, flowers and voices.*

*The children's wing held no clowns, no laughter. The home for the aged was like a tomb.*

*The blind listened for a voice that never came.*

*The infirm were imprisoned on wheelchairs that never moved.*

*Food grew cold on trays that would never reach the hungry.*

*I fought in my sleep to regain a glimpse of the ship of volunteers just one more time.*

*It was to be my last glimpse of a decent civilization.” [5]*

Decent civilization relies on the legs and hands, voices and listening ears

of the ordinary folk whom God has commandeered for outrageous assignments.

And great is their reward in heaven.

We find this pearl of wisdom in the Hebrew Scriptures.

2 Kings 5 teaches us the story of the healing of the great and mighty General Naaman.

*Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram,*

*was a great man and in high favor with his master,  
because by him the LORD had given victory to  
Aram.*

*The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy.*

*Now the Arameans on one of their raids*

*had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel,  
and she served Naaman's wife.*

*She said to her mistress,*

*“If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria!  
He would cure him of his leprosy.” (2 Kings 5: 1-3)*

Clearly God thought nothing of commandeering this servant girl  
to carry forth God’s outrageous assignment:

she was to bear witness to the healing power of  
God,

even though she was a stranger in a strange  
land.

She did what she was sent to do so well

that to this day we tell her story  
and give God the glory.

Her name is written in heaven,

and great was her reward.

The mighty general Naaman followed through,

and soon arrived in Samaria at the home of the prophet Elisha.

The general pulled up with an entourage of chariots and horsemen,

with “*ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments.*” (2 Kings 5: 5)

He was ready to pay for whatever it would cost to be healed of leprosy.

Elisha could not care less about Naaman’s power, wealth, purchasing power or line of credit.

God’s reward is given in love -- and it is love.

God’s love can’t be bought or sold.

Martin Luther started a religious revolution

when he protested the Church’s practice of selling of indulgences.

You can’t buy or earn or bargain for grace from God;

grace is love in action, and it’s not for sale.

Paul McCartney and John Lennon penned “Can’t Buy Me Love” for the Beatles.

Their pearl of wisdom shot up the charts to Number One of the Billboard Top 100.

*I'll give you all I've got to give If you say you love me too I may not have a lot to give But what I've got I'll give to you I don't care too much for money For money can't buy me love [6]*

Money sure 'nuff can't buy spiritual healing or humility or hope.

Ask Naaman, the mighty man of valor, commander of armies,  
the general who made kings shake in their boots and rent their clothes.

Elisha wanted to see whether Naaman could and would  
humble himself in the sight of the Lord.

Naaman needed to allow the God of love to commandeering him,  
and not vice versa.

The prophet sent word to the general to dip himself seven times in the River Jordan.

(Friends who have been to the Holy Land tell me that Naaman was right about the Jordan River not being so great and mighty. The Jordan River isn't deep and wide; it's more like muddy and shallow, like a creek. At least that is what they say!)

When Naaman protested and stomped away,  
once again it was his servants whom God commandeered.

The servants eased Naaman's mind and brought him back to earth,  
saying, "*Father, if the prophet had commanded you*

*to do something difficult, would you not  
have done it?*

*How much more, when all he said to  
you was,*

*‘Wash, and be clean’?”*

*So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the  
Jordan,*

*according to the word of the man of God;*

*his flesh was restored..., and he was clean.*

Clearly God thought nothing of commandeering the servants and aides of Naaman

to carry forth God’s outrageous assignment:

they recognized that power and wealth won’t buy  
divine healing.

They understood that what God desires is a willing spirit and a contrite heart.

Clearly God thought nothing of commandeering these servants

to carry forth God’s outrageous assignment:

speak the truth in love to a hurt and hurting soul.

Their names are lost to us, possibly because history is written by winners.

However their names are written in heaven and great was their reward.

Pearls of wisdom were shared by Albert Schweitzer

the day he spoke to a group of schoolchildren, saying:

*“And when I answer such letters I add something else: ‘Seek a humble sort of thing.’*

*Our hearts often look for something very big,*

*something wanting a lot of sacrifice,*

*and often our heart does not see the humble things.*

*At first you must learn to do the humble things*

*and often they are the most difficult to do.*

*In those humble things, be busy about helping someone who has need of you.*

*You see somebody alone—try and be with him,*

*try to give him some of the hours which you might take for yourself*

*and in that way learn to serve:*

*and then only will you begin to find true happiness.*

*I don't know what your destiny will be.*

*Some of you will perhaps occupy remarkable positions.*

*Perhaps some of you will become famous by your pens, or as artists.*

*But I know one thing:*

*the only ones among you who will be really happy*

*are those who have sought and found how to serve.”[7]*

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Extra Material:

The biblical model for church leadership described here

guided both the first churches

and later the Disciples of Christ revival movement.

This biblical model taught disciples of Christ how to lead.

*Don't work alone:* do ministry in teams, working together for the greater good. *Don't become isolated:* be a living presence and serve in the midst of the community.

*Don't be ostentatious:* live simply, and trust in the Lord to provide for your physical and spiritual needs.

*Don't be obstinate:* when you are rejected or ignored, let go of any grudges or discontent, learn the lessons you must, and move on.

*Don't neglect the disinherited:* emulate Jesus by serving to and with the marginalized, calling them by name, and ministering as a servant leader.

*Don't forget who or whose you are:* you are a child of God, baptized, called and anointed to serve humbly, as one with



divine authority, with “...no arrogant display of power, for [you are] the servant of God whose ministry will take [you] to the cross.”[8] *Do take your cue from God as revealed in Jesus Christ.* Look first to Jesus as the embodiment of messiah, mission and message.

### Call to Offering

While the shadow of the Cross was still fresh on the ground and echoes of our Messiah’s last words still rang across the land, the first few churches of Jesus Christ were formed and shaped by the practice of hospitality. In the Church’s infancy and through to today, the practice of hospitality is a “cardinal virtue”. Jesus’ followers discern the practice of hospitality from the Master himself. He trusted in the Lord to provide, and He trusted in the Lord to provide for servants doing God’s work and will. When we pool our resources and gifts with a spirit of joy and generosity, we discover afresh how the Lord provides. Doubts and fears are cast aside when we experience firsthand that caring for God’s servants, congregation, and folks in need is grounded in the practice of being hospitable, of welcoming and caring for those in our midst.

### Prayer for Offering

Loving Lord, bless all who are here today in this holy place

and sacred space. Bless all our resources at your disposal, including our gifts and talents that are dedicated to your service. In your name we pray, amen.

### Call to Communion

After the debriefing comes the deserting. Regularly do we offer our gifts and selves for ministry; we should also regularly practice self care. Your just dessert for pouring yourself out in love and service is a regular opportunity to desert from the crowd for renewal and refreshment. Do you recall the airline commercial that shows a person poking around in someone else's bathroom? She is opening a cabinet to peek at their private meds when suddenly a glass shelf shatters. There is no hiding that she is nosey. Then a deep voice says, "*Want to get away?*" You know, Jesus offers the opportunity to get away and be renewed. Jesus receives our many gifts. He then offers one of his own: recreation. Here and now is a good time and place to practice the discipline of self-care. Steal away with Jesus to rest. Relax. Retreat for a bit to recover, remember, and re-create.

### Benediction

Jesus gives to us this Good News: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ...Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near." (Luke 10: 2-3,

11b) Let us go forth together to serve, to invite, to heal, and to share the message we know by heart and from experience: God loves you, and we do, too! Amen!

[1] William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol. 41, No. 3, Page 7

[2] William H. Willimon, Calling and Character: Virtues of the Ordained Life, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 138.

[3] Ibid., 138.

[4] William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol. 41, No. 3, Page 7

[5] "So Long, Volunteers" by Erma Bombeck

[6] "Can't buy me love" by Lennon/McCartney

[7] Albert Schweitzer, in a speech to the students of Silcoates School, Wakefield (along with "a number of boys and girls from Ackworth School"), on "The Meaning of Ideals in Life," at approximately 3:40 p.m. on 3 December 1935.

[8] Fred Craddock, et al, Editors, Preaching the New Common Lectionary, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 119.