

What's It Worth?

In the name him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: Today I'd like to begin with a question for you to think about. It's this: How do you determine what something is worth? How do you know what's a fair price to pay for something you want to buy – or conversely, what's an appropriate price to charge for an item someone's buying from you? With respect to any article, how do you know what to pay or what to charge?

For some things, the answer is fairly obvious. For you farmers, the market determines the relative value of commodities like corn, soybeans, beef, and pork. It has to do mostly with supply and demand. If you're buying or selling a car, you can go to the *Kelly Blue Book*, which lists standard prices for motor vehicles based on their year, mileage, and general condition. It's still basic supply and demand. I think the same is supposed to be true of gasoline, but I've noticed that the price at the pump rarely has any direct connection to the price per barrel that oil companies are paying; so it seems to me that there's more involved. One thing's for sure: the price of gas is always higher than I think it should be. But that's how prices are set for most basic goods. It's simply a function of supply and demand.

It's a little tougher to determine the worth of very rare or unique items. I know I've mentioned *Antiques Road Show* before. And now there's a popular show called *Pawn Stars*. The gist of the two programs is the same: people bring in rare treasures they own (or more often, items that *they hope* may be rare treasures) and they are evaluated by experts in their respective fields. They consider such things as the relative condition of the items, how rare they are, the proof of their authenticity, the story that goes along with them, whether they've been modified or restored in some way (which, oddly enough, usually subtracts value), and a number of other factors; and then they pronounce a price range that the items should fetch at auction. Of course, the price they quote assumes that there's going to be people at these imaginary auctions who actually want to buy whatever it is. And that's always struck me as fatal flaw in the scheme. No matter how much something you have is supposedly worth, you're not going to get that much if you can't find someone willing to buy at that price.

I mean, just look what happened with the housing market a few years back. A lot of people thought they were really getting ahead; but the truth is that their homes were highly overvalued. Why? Well, in a nutshell, the government made it possible for people who normally couldn't afford home loans to get them. The setup allowed them to pay artificially lower mortgage rates for a few years, which were to increase later when, presumably, the buyers would be making more money and be able to afford it. But this put a lot more people in the housing market, which drove up the price of homes straight across the board. So people were buying houses with artificially inflated prices and paying (initially at least) artificially lower rates for them. Then the day of reckoning came (it always does). When the rates they had to pay increased according to their contracts, too many couldn't afford the payments; so they defaulted on their loans. This left lending institutions holding houses that weren't worth nearly as much as they thought. And it left many people with mortgages that are "underwater", that is, even after having paid for years (in some cases), they still owe more for their homes than the homes are worth.

But at least with a home you have something that has intrinsic value because it's a necessary commodity. People have to live someplace. I recently read an article about the big

bubble and collapse of the comic book market. A few years ago when the economy was booming along, collectors were snatching up rare old copies of comic books thinking they were making wise investments because the price of these items kept skyrocketing due to the high demand. But then the economy went south and money got tight, and guess what? You know, when you lose your job and can't afford groceries, suddenly the last thing you need is a bunch of stupid old comic books. The market for them evaporated. Collections supposedly worth hundreds of thousands of dollars were revalued at small fractions of what their owners paid for them. Same comic books; but now nobody wants them.

Now, I'm certainly no economist; but I've come up with this general rule: the worth of an item at any given moment is what you or someone else is willing to pay for it. And I like this way of determining what something is worth because it takes into consideration intangibles like sentimental value and immediate need. For instance, family heirlooms that have been handed down for generations, or a diary, or a wedding ring, or a drawing or craft made by your child, these things can be worth far more to you than their actual monetary value to anyone else. That is, if for some reason you lost ownership of one such item and later found it for sale, you'd be willing to pay more than anyone else to have it back. Likewise, suppose you're in the desert without any water and someone comes along who's got some. You'd be willing to pay a lot more for it than you would at any normal time. So I what I'm saying is that the worth of an item can be highly subjective and dependent on the situation.

But maybe by now you're wondering where I'm going with all this. I won't leave you guessing. In light of all that has been said, let me ask this question: What's your Christian faith worth to you? How much do you value your trust in Jesus and the forgiveness, life, and salvation you have in him? In today's Gospel, Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a treasure hidden in a field, which a man discovers and then goes and sells all that he has in order to possess. And again, he compares it to an especially fine pearl which a merchant sells all that he has so that he can claim it as his own. Picking up this general theme, we just sang in the hymn "Your kingdom, O God, is my glorious treasure, my pearl of incomparable worth. Its value exceeds every standard of measure, surpassing the wealth of the earth." In another popular hymn we sing, "Jesus priceless treasure, fount of purest pleasure, truest friend to me". These are fine sentiments indeed. They express what the truth is: that nothing is more valuable in all the universe than the faith and trust you have in Christ. Your eternal destiny – whether you are one of the righteous who are gathered and kept by the Lord or one of the evil who are tossed away into the fire – depends on your faith in Christ alone. But I wonder: can you say that these fine sentiments are actually true of you? Always? *Do you really* put that much worth on your life in Christ? And more to the point, does the way you live your life reflect the value you place on your Christian faith?

These are not idle questions. And I tremble thinking that we sit here all superficially pious, mouthing the words of hymns such as these without the conscious thought that we're lying to the Lord, to ourselves, and to each other as we sing. And to illustrate what I mean, suppose you did value your faith in Christ and your life in God's Kingdom, the Church, as much as they're really worth, according to their priceless value. What would that look like?

When I was in the Army stationed at Fort Ord there was a parking lot across from the building where I worked. It was the place where, every Sunday without fail, a group of somewhere between twenty to thirty soldiers would gather with their cars. And you have to understand that for most of these soldiers, these cars were the finest and most expensive things they'd ever owned. I mean most of them were single kids from the city. They'd never had any real jobs, never made any real money, and certainly never owned a car. But now, with room

and board taken care of by Uncle Sam, they found themselves with money in the bank and a steady (even if small) income. So they bought their first cars. And they worshipped them. That's what they did on Sundays. They'd get together in this parking lot and, with their music blasting away from oversize speakers that caused the ground to quake, they'd wash and polish and vacuum and do everything short of lovingly caress—no, I take that back, some of them did actually lovingly caress, their precious cars. They kept them in immaculate condition. There was not a speck of dust, not a bit of smudged chrome, not a windshield that didn't glisten with crystal clarity. And they'd be there for five, six, seven hours hard at it. And then the next week they'd be right there happily doing it all over again.

They were just cars. And that was twenty-five years ago. So I think it's a safe bet that by now 95% of those cars then so painstakingly and lovingly maintained have been consigned to the junk heap. But something tells me that if we valued our Christian faith even a small fraction of what's it worth, our attitude toward coming to hear God's Word, and receiving God's gifts of grace, and joining in the psalms and hymns that we sing, and receiving Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, and making sure that our faith was being fed and being kept pure and undefiled by false doctrine and the vain philosophies of man – it would look something like those soldiers and the way they treated their cars. That's how devoted we'd be.

And, you know, if you possess something that's quite valuable, the chances are that you insure it against loss. That is, you make the necessary arrangements and you pay something extra to guarantee that in the event of loss or damage, you'll get it back. And so it is with the Christian faith. If we really appreciated its unsurpassed value, we'd be doing the same thing: going above and beyond mere ownership and maintenance. We'd be leaning forward and taking responsible preemptive action to ensure that the faith we have is not only fed today; but that it will be tomorrow too. That means investing our time, our talents, and our resources in the local church and its operation. It means participating in the church's governance and policy making. It means supporting seminaries and our church's district and national administration. And it means encouraging people, especially young people with the right aptitudes, to pursue careers in church work. And mind you, this is not a stewardship sermon; but you can't deny that what you put into the collection plate does say something about the value you place upon God's Kingdom.

And something else we do with the things we own that we hold to be the most valuable is that we make sure they are preserved and that they're passed down to our descendants in the same or even better condition than we received them. And what could be more important than ensuring that the children and grandchildren God gives you are coheirs with you of his heavenly kingdom? No, you can't live their lives for them; but how are they going to know what's most valuable in this life unless you teach them – unless they see you set the example for them? And it's not just to your descendants that you can give this gift. The wonderful thing about the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that no matter how many people possess the treasure, its value to each "share holder" never decreases. In fact, the opposite is true. The more people who share the treasure, the more enriched the family of the faithful is. We only gain more brothers and sisters in Christ. And that means that we who value the treasure most – as we should – will be doing the most to ensure that God's Word is spread.

With all this in mind, then, let me ask again: how much do you really value God's Kingdom? I don't mean theoretically, or how much you think you should value it; I mean what do your actions and actual day to day thoughts say about how much you value your life in Christ? Are you treating it as you should? Or do you find yourself more often placing higher priorities on other things? More concerned about the commodities that you need for day to day

life than the Bread of Life, the food that lasts for eternity and sustains your soul? Are you making wise investments with your time and your talents, or are you investing in things that are highly overvalued at present and that are destined to lose all their value – the spiritual equivalent of comic books? Or perhaps you're waiting, putting in the bare minimum of interest now and thinking that you'll get more serious and take care of it later when the need arises. I need to warn you, with an attitude like that you'll likely find that when the need arises, the cost will be too high. It's Jesus who asked, "What worth would it be to gain the whole world if you lost your own soul?" How much do you really value God's kingdom and your faith in Christ?

I can only speak for myself. And I know the answer is "Not nearly as much as I should." And if your self evaluation is the same, then let me ask this: What are you worth to God's Kingdom? Should he, the Lord, put you down as an asset or a liability? Again, I can only speak for myself ... and an honest appraisal puts me in squarely the negative column. How about you?

Fortunately for us, our worth to the Lord is not determined by what we think, say, or do – or how much we value his kingdom. No, the worth of an item is what someone is willing to pay for it. And for you the Lord gave everything – he sold all that he had, as it were – and gave up his beloved Son to suffer and die on the cross precisely for your complete and utter lack of worth. To the Lord, *you* are the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great price. This is the absolutely stunning central truth of our Christian faith. And if he made this infinitely high investment in you when you were dead in sin and completely worthless, how much more do you imagine that you are worth to him now that you've been cleansed, redeemed, and given new life in Christ? And I've got news for you: he's still investing in you. He's still giving you his Son: his life, his truth, his Word, his body and blood, and his Spirit. And the more you receive, the more you become like him.

And that's priceless.

So may we learn to value Christ, his Kingdom, and his truth as we should. May we live our lives accordingly, investing ourselves as we ought. And may we also learn to see and to value each other as the Lord does: as treasures precious to him for Jesus' sake. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!