

In many cities across America, car dealerships tend to cluster in certain areas, similar to the Auto Mall we have here in Skagit Valley. Should you feel a need to walk around browsing the cars and trucks parked on different lots, you probably wouldn't be all that surprised to see signs that proclaim: FINANCING AVAILABLE!! BAD CREDIT OK!! Clearly, these dealerships want to sell their automobiles. Even if your credit is awful, they will find a way to sell you a car.

Go online, and you'll find many sites that use similar language. One site trumpets: "No collateral needed? No hassle! We can help. Get the cash you need in as fast as 24-48 hours." Other headlines scream: Bad Credit Loans Fast & Easy! Be debt free by this time tomorrow! Or No money down needed! 0 percent financing for 60 months! Or something like, "Bring Home \$350 a week and you can get up to \$30,000 in credit."

These headlines are particularly interesting, because one can find similar headlines in the Bible! In fact, today's first lesson from Isaiah has a very strong pitch to those who are without funds: "You that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." What a fabulous offer! "Without money and without price!" To think that one might find a wine store where the bottles have no price tags, and they can "buy" a 2017 cabernet from Napa Valley "without money!"

Of course, our first reaction to hearing these words is that there has to be some kind of catch right? After all, how do you **buy** something without money? How is that even possible? Well, if a store owner gives you something, but doesn't charge you for it; it's called a gift, not a purchase. You didn't **buy** anything. The owner might say, "This one's on the house." And that is precisely the good news of Jesus Christ.

Were it not for the unbounded and bottomless love and mercy of God — who is the Merchant, who owns the Vineyard — we would not stand a chance of

being able to afford all that God has to offer. Fortunately for us, God doesn't demand payment. In fact, if we want what God has to offer, we cannot pay for it, or earn it for that matter.

Clearly, God sees Isaiah's audience in our first lesson this morning as thirsty and hungry, and lacking money to purchase what they need to slake their thirst and stave off their hunger. Which begs the question, is it possible that we might have something in common with the people of Isaiah's day? Are we thirsty? Are we parched? In the quiet moments when night falls and sleep approaches, do we have a nagging suspicion that there must be more to life? Do we hunger for a life that is rich in meaning and invested with a significant purpose?

If we are hungry and thirsty, why do we **stay** hungry and thirsty? Our reading this morning seems to suggest that those who know they're hungry and thirsty have no recourse because they lack the funds to purchase food and drink. This, in turn, is because of two serious problems: We spend money on the wrong things, and we work for "that which does not satisfy."

I'm sure none of us would deny that there are times when we spend our money on the wrong things and afterwards, we don't always feel good about it. When we buy certain things (perhaps high-ticket items) when we know that we should have allocated the funds for something more serious, we feel badly in our hearts. Our conscience is troubled; it nags us and condemns us.

We know we should not have spent the money on something we wanted, because it should have gone toward something we actually needed. We know it. No reason to badger ourselves about it. We get it. We all have done this, of course — bought something which later caused us to experience buyer's remorse.

Today the prophet Isaiah challenges us to assess why we seem to be spiritually bankrupt and to question why so many people appear to doubt their purpose or existence in this world. So why? Why is our life so empty when God

wants it to be so full? The first part of the answer, according to today's reading, is that we spend our currency on the wrong things. And the second is, we often work hard for "that which does not satisfy."

God wants to know why we work without meaning, why we labor all day and cannot see the divine in the jobs we have. For example: Why do we teach in the classroom, perform surgery in the OR, defend a client in a courtroom, clean rooms and bathrooms at a Comfort Inn, or work construction in a building project? Why do we do these things and not think about the content of our work, the meaning of our actions, and the purpose of our lives? Is there no one at our place of employment who needs our prayers? Is there no one who might need a small word of encouragement? In other words, we must give our work meaning, or we face a bleak and depressing future.

Thankfully with God Bad credit is okay and our divine creator has a great deal for us! God invites us to get some wine for our table, to get milk for our children, and to "delight ourselves in rich food." For free! Bad credit is not a problem. God invites us to the market where we can see everything that's available. We can buy bread. We can "eat what is good." If we're willing, God will put us on a three-step program that includes the actions to: come, buy, and eat.

The first step in the program is for us to Come. God extends an open invitation to "come." What does this mean, really? To come to God, accepting God's invitation to approach, means that we stop resisting God; that we crack open the door a bit; that we lower our defenses or walls; that we acknowledge that we need God; that we take faltering steps toward acknowledging God as our God. It's a favorite imperative in Scripture. "Come to the waters," God says. Then in the same verse he repeats this imperative two more times: Come to the waters, you that have no money, come, buy and eat." Three times: "Come."

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus says, "Come to me, all that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." In the first chapter of John, Jesus declares, "Come and see" to two of John's disciples who followed Jesus and were curious about him. And in the book of Revelation, Jesus is pictured as knocking on a door saying, "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come inside and eat with you, and you with me."

The command to "come" is the first step in God's three-step program to renewed spiritual health. And the good news is that our credit score is not relevant. God just invites us to begin to consider God, to include God, to inch toward a fresh understanding that being close to God is not a bad thing...and could be a really good thing for us actually. God has a deal for us that we cannot and should not refuse!

To "**buy**" is the second step in God's three-step program. To buy *is to believe*. To buy is to buy *into*, to take ownership, to embrace, to go big or go home. To buy is to say to God, "I'm in." When we buy something, we acknowledge the value of what we're purchasing. The product is important to us — so important that we're willing to part with our hard-earned cash to get it. In the case of this morning's lesson though, "buying" doesn't mean we must part with anything or give anything up. Rather it means to believe that what God offers us is, in fact, not for sale.

And finally, we **Eat** *as part of the third step in the program*. To eat is to receive in our hands that which we have "bought." To eat is to lift the fork and knife and dive in. To eat is to "taste and see that the Lord is good." That is an action of faith. It is also an action we will shortly take as we receive the body and blood of Jesus in Holy Communion.

Of course, not everyone is excited about a good deal. They're suspicious. They've heard extravagant claims before. They scoff at things that seem too good to be true and worry about being conned. Others may not share this skepticism, but they're weary of life and just don't have any more energy to put into trying to be good. They are who they are and that will never change. Still others can't even fathom the idea that they are not good enough for God. What have they done that could possibly earn God's disapproval or wrath? They don't need a great deal. They already have one. They've found a life without God, and they're perfectly happy. Sadly, these people don't know what they're missing.

As we think of these different responses and reactions, we may begin to wonder a little about God's grace and who it is actually for. Well, let me tell you, God's grace is for those who "seek the Lord, while he may be found." It's for those who "call upon him while he is near." Through the prophet Jeremiah God says, "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me." When we "forsake" what should be forsaken and when we "return to the Lord," God will "abundantly pardon."

As we hear the early verses of today's lesson, it all may sound too good to be true. And we know what is said about things that sound too good to be true right? How can you "buy" something that's free? Why would God make a deal with people whose credit rating is in the tank? Why does God care? Why does God love us and want us to live abundantly with tables that are laden with "rich food," wine, bread and milk? And if we took some time to think about our responses to these questions, I'm sure we could propose all kinds of answers — perhaps even very good ones.

In the end, however, we're left with what God says in the closing verses of this passage: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways ... for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your

ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” And thanks be to God for that.
Amen.