

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who satisfies our hungry hearts, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

I was stationed at or have visited over 20 military bases in my life and they all have some things in common. They all have guards at the gates, they all have at least one water tower with the command's logo painted on the side, and they all have pawn shops, check cashing, and quick loan stores right outside the front gate. The ones that interests me this morning are those quickie Loan Offices offering thousands of dollars to airmen barely making minimum wage, but do have a steady paycheck. These modern-day loan sharks offer cash in minutes to desperate people who need cash now, and to those who are still naive in the ways of high finance. They offer their loans to people with low credit, no credit, and beyond my comprehension, even to those with known BAD credit. That's where the First Lesson from today's reading caught my eye this week. When our credit is shot, God steps forward with the deal of a lifetime!

In today's Old Testament reading, we hear the voice of just such a Salesperson, and the pitch is attractive and alluring: "Come, buy wine ... without money and without price." Is this a deal, or what?! No collateral! No hassle! One TV commercial sticks in my head with Vikings singing opera to the tune 877-Cash-Now! In the old days Bad credit loans were strictly the territory of loan

sharks who would crack your ribs if the high-interest loan is not paid off. I'm not sure what they do today when people fail to pay for these high risk loans. I know some of these high-risk mortgages were given to folks who didn't even have jobs created the housing bubble that crashed the housing market about 12 years ago...

So, isn't it interesting, we can find similar offers in the Bible, coming from God no less! In fact, today's Isaiah reading 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" (v. 1). What a fabulous offer! "Without money and without price"! To think there's a store out there somewhere with bottles of wine that have no price tags. I'll take the six liter Screaming Eagle Cabernet Sauvignon 1992. That bottle recently sold for a half million dollars! But seriously... How do you "buy" something without money? If the 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."

This 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 wouldn't stand a chance of being able to afford all God has to offer. Fortunately, God doesn't demand payment, at least not from us... In fact, if we want what God has to offer, we can't pay for it.

God sees Isaiah's audience as thirsty and hungry, and lacking money to purchase what they need to satisfy their thirst and stave off their hunger. Is it possible we today have a lot in common with the people of Isaiah's time? Are we soul thirsty? In our quiet moments, do we have a nagging suspicion there must be more to life? Do we hunger for a life rich in meaning and a significant purpose? Is the Boss, Bruce Springsteen, right when he sings, "Everybody Has a Hungry Heart?" If we're hungry and thirsty, why do we stay hungry and thirsty? Isaiah says there's two reasons. We spend money on the wrong things, and we work for that which does not satisfy.

Spending money on the wrong things can affect us adversely in a couple of ways. When we buy certain things (perhaps high-ticket items) even though we know the money should go for a more serious purpose, it nags us and condemns us. We know we should not have spent the money on this, because it should have gone toward that. Some people have a larger spending problem. Perhaps the word "budget" isn't even in their vocabulary or maybe they don't understand the concept of savings. In the big picture I'm really not talking about just how we spend our moola, I'm talking about other currencies too. The currency of time, for example, or how we apply the talents God has given us to use and to share with others.

Why is our life so empty when God wants it to be so full? The first part of the answer, according to Isaiah 55:2, is we spend our currency on the wrong things and second, we often work hard for that which does not satisfy. This is a huge problem for many people. Not everyone can work for an NGO providing clean water and developing safe sewage treatment. Not everyone can sign up for the Peace Corps, or take a year-long furlough to teach children in Cambodia or rescue children suffering in the wake of war. Not everyone can be teachers, doctors or nurses. Not everyone can be in fulltime religious ministry. Some people work in factories where they're involved in a lot of repetitive work. Others work in a cubicle with dozens of employees who've been assigned a little, temporary space. This is where they do their jobs day after day. Some work outdoors painting stripes on highways. To be honest, no matter what job you hold, if all it is to you is a job, then you're headed down the road to Emptyville, if you're not there already!

It doesn't have to be that way. God wants us all to know all work is honorable, whether we're cleaning bathrooms in hotels or performing triple-bypass surgery. If that's true, why do so many people work all day and miss seeing the Divine in their work. Why can't we experience fulfillment in the work we do and the job we have? Why do we teach in the classroom, perform surgery in the operating theatre, defend a client in a courtroom, clean a bathroom in the Ritz hotel

or work construction 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? At your workplace, is there no one in need of a word of encouragement? Can you receive pleasure just knowing you gave your best and your employer trusts you to do this work for him or her? Without meaning and purpose in our labors we face a bleak and depressing future. Even for those in retirement, the tasks of daily living can either bring joy and fulfillment or depressing emptiness if you see no meaning or purpose behind what you're doing.

What's the solution? God does have a great deal for us! God invites us to get some wine for our table, to get milk for the children and to delight ourselves in rich food. All for free! Bad credit is not a problem. God isn't concerned we didn't pay our bills in the past. God knows we can't climb out of the debtor's hole we're in. God knows we're in no position to repay all He has done for us. God also knows we've made many promises in the past and reneged on them! God knows we're not a particularly good risk. And this is the good news! God will put us on a three-step program: come, buy, eat.

Come. God extends an open invitation to come. Come to God, accepting God's invitation. Stop resisting God. Crack the door a bit; lower our defenses; let down our walls. Repent. That is what the season of Lent is about. The first step

in God's 3 Step Program for our lives is "Come." Your credit score is irrelevant your ability to pay is unnecessary. Just Come...

Buy. This is the second step in God's three-step program. This step means to buy in--to take ownership—to fully embrace--to go big or go home. To buy is to say to God, "I'm all 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 hard-earned cash to get it. In this case, "buy" doesn't mean we part with anything or give up anything. It means to believe what God offers is, in fact, so valuable it isn't for sale. It's to trust in God and to place your faith in Jesus Christ for everything you need.

The third step in God's three step program is Eat. We receive in our hands what we have "bought." To eat is to taste and see the Lord is good as the Psalmist writes... (Psalm 34:8). This is the action of faith. To eat is to receive the grace of God that we could never afford and certainly never deserve.

May we never look at God's offer of the abundant life, God's three step program Come, Buy, Eat, and think "If it sounds too good to be true, it must be too good to be true." May we instead receive that which truly satisfies the longing of our hearts, Jesus Christ our Lord and may we share Him with this hungry and thirsty world. Amen.