

The Bottom Line

Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8; Psalm 126 3-25-07

As the day of the taxman approacheth, it seems that many of us have our eyes and minds fixed on the bottom lines of our tax returns. We are anxious to learn whether we will rejoice when all that math work is done or whether we will suffer. We have been granted two extra days this year before all must be postmarked.

I will always remember my father working on his taxes up to the absolute deadline and then sending one of us to the post office at 11ish at night to make sure when whomever checked all the postmarks that he had not paid the government one moment before he had to, nor one minute too late. I can't quite believe that people have the job of checking all those postmarks. It must be enough to drive anyone a little crazy. As I think of those poor souls and as I think of my dad, I wish you all many happy returns.

No matter what time of year it is, it often seems that we live in a world ruled, in one way or another, by the bottom line.

A few months ago I heard from a friend who, after working for twenty-two years in a very small office, had suddenly been told her job had been outsourced. The focus of the person who managed the office was on the bottom line and the cut needed to bring everything into balance was precisely what my friend made each year. Twenty-two years of loyal service meant nothing, the budget did.

And, just a week or so ago I had a call from a long-time friend who had worked as a chaplain in a retirement community for twenty-five years, telling me that her job had been eliminated. She was told this on a Thursday and the job ended the following Tuesday. This woman had trained the priests who became her bosses one after another and had served the entire community well. She is loved and valued by the residents and their families, but she was paid a few more benefits than the budget could stretch to handle. She was surprised, although she had seen other long-term employees in the same predicament. She is seventy-three years old and was sent on her way with little to no severance pay. The bottom line had risen up and bitten both of these women in institutions in which they had felt a measure of safety after years of faithful service.

I have another very good friend who works on bottom line problems for his company. In the time I have known him I have seen him agonize over those times when people must be laid off for the survival of that company. To my friend these are real people who will have to struggle before they regain their footing. He always treats them as fairly as possible and often leaves the door open for reemployment if and when things turn themselves around.

While we might think that such a focus on the bottom line is peculiar to our time, we see that it is not new as we look at the Gospel of John and the actions of Mary lavishing oil of nard on Jesus' feet much to the dismay of Judas. He was sure that had the expensive perfume been sold it would have brought a lot of money for the poor and for the treasury that he kept.

Treasurers of any institution, bless their hearts, always have their focus on the bottom line to the exclusion of much else. This is not a bad thing; somebody has to be around to always clang the bell of reason and caution.

But Jesus took exception to the warning Judas issued. He knew that Judas was missing the point. He understood that his mission on earth was drawing to an end and this emotional move of Mary's was meant to further prepare those who could and would see what was going on. Bodies were usually anointed with perfumed oil in preparation for burial. Mary was doing this for her Master. Jesus had been telling his followers that he was going to leave them. What better symbol could there have been than the action that took place?

We learn as the story unfolds further that Judas had a far different "bottom line" in mind in regard to Jesus. Our Bibles tell us of his betrayal of the one he had followed. Many motives have been offered to explain this final action of Judas and no conclusion has been found. Judas remains a mystery, as does much of the story of Jesus. But in spite of the mystery, we move forward in faith.

The same kind of faith Paul exhibited in his Letter to the Philippians. Paul noted that there had been much he had been through yet his goal remained the same. He wanted to know Christ more fully and to experience the resurrection he believed would come from such knowledge. He said that this was not an easy task and likened it to a long race—a marathon of sorts. He knew he had not reached the goal but still had a long way to go in the process. In spite of being disappointed or frightened by what still was before him, he pressed on to achieve his goal urging those who read this little letter to do the same. Paul's bottom line was to suffer as Christ had and to become one with him in life, death and resurrection.

While I often shake my head over what it is Paul has written, I know that, at heart, he had what should be the goal of every one who professes to be "Christian." Our goal is to incorporate the life and teachings of Christ into our lives and to share them with others. We, as Protestants, do not dwell on the suffering of Jesus. That is not where our focus is. That is why in many Protestant churches the crosses displayed are bare crosses and not crosses that present the crucifixion in all its agony. The celebration of Christ for us is that of the resurrected being instead of the one who suffered while dying. The empty cross is a symbol of the glory of the resurrection and the risen Christ.

This is our goal, our spiritual bottom line. We believe that if we live lives worthy of our calling as Christ's followers we will go on eternally. Some believe this will be a physical journey, others that we journey on as spiritual beings. We believe that this life cannot be all that there is. There is something more for us. We believe this because this is what we have been taught as we grew up in our faith. And if we have our doubts, we still hang on to our core faith sensing, as one of my friends always says, "It is best to keep all our bases covered."

This is far from the certain conviction Paul had. But it is a start in the right direction. With patience and persistence with ourselves and our ability to process what has been set before us as "the way, the truth and the life," we, too, may arrive at a proper bottom line that sustains us as we continue on our journey of faith. Amen