

The Value of One
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
August 29, 2010

Old Testament Reading: 2nd Samuel 9:1-13

¹David asked, "Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul to whom I may show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" ²Now there was a servant of the house of Saul whose name was Ziba, and he was summoned to David. The king said to him, "Are you Ziba?" And he said, "At your service!" ³The king said, "Is there anyone remaining of the house of Saul to whom I may show the kindness of God?" Ziba said to the king, "There remains a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in his feet." ⁴The king said to him, "Where is he?" Ziba said to the king, "He is in the house of Machir son of Ammiel, at Lo-debar." ⁵Then King David sent and brought him from the house of Machir son of Ammiel, at Lo-debar. ⁶Mephibosheth son of Jonathan son of Saul came to David, and fell on his face and did obeisance. David said, "Mephibosheth!" He answered, "I am your servant." ⁷David said to him, "Do not be afraid, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan; I will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul, and you yourself shall eat at my table always." ⁸He did obeisance and said, "What is your servant, that you should look upon a dead dog such as I?"

⁹Then the king summoned Saul's servant Ziba, and said to him, "All that belonged to Saul and to all his house I have given to your master's grandson. ¹⁰You and your sons and your servants shall till the land for him, and shall bring in the produce, so that your master's grandson may have food to eat; but your master's grandson Mephibosheth shall always eat at my table." Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants. ¹¹Then Ziba said to the king, "According to all that my lord the king commands his servant, so your servant will do." Mephibosheth ate at David's table, like one of the king's sons. ¹²Mephibosheth had a young son whose name was Mica. And all who lived in Ziba's house became Mephibosheth's servants. ¹³Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he always ate at the king's table. Now he was lame in both his feet.

New Testament Reading: Luke 14:1-14

¹On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. ²Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy. ³And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?" ⁴But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away. ⁵Then he said to them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?" ⁶And they could not reply to this.

⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." ¹²He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Proverbs 29:23 – A person’s pride will bring humiliation, but one who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor.”

In Matthew 18:4, when Jesus is asked “who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” He replies “whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Why is it so important to be humble and so bad to be prideful? Because we are told over and over that the greatest law is to love God and to love each other, and when we see ourselves as most important, than we have a tendency to lift up our own well-being and our own needs first, and to love ourselves before either God or neighbor.

Jesus addresses not only how the guests see themselves, but how they view each other and how they view other people in their community, particularly the poor and the outcast. Jesus says, don’t invite your friends or relatives or your rich neighbors; the folks who can pay you back, the folks for whom an invitation from you might be a way to guarantee their favors in the future. No, invite the weak and the poor and those who have need but no way to reward you for your invitation.

Don’t invite friends and relatives? Mom’s not going to be happy come Christmas.

But is that what Jesus is saying here? Is this an injunction against inviting friends and family to your home for dinner or to celebrate important occasions? Must we host groups of the homeless and the poor and the lame every time we celebrate a graduation or a birthday or an anniversary?

No, that’s not what Jesus is saying. You can still have the family over for Thanksgiving this year. But Jesus is pointing out that the Pharisee has invited people to his home based solely on their ability to benefit him in some way. For the Pharisee, people have value only in so far as they can do something for him. If knowing them or inviting them into his home does not provide him with some benefit, than he does not bother.

On the surface, this passage is about banquet seating and guest lists, but the heart of Jesus message here is that we should not place more value on ourselves than we do on others; that we should not place greater value on people who are easy to love or on people with power; and we should not place more value on people from whom we can gain benefit or advantage for ourselves than we place on those who have nothing of note to offer us.

Because when we do, we begin to orient our lives toward serving only those who can answer with gifts and rewards that serve us. When we love only friends and family, we invest our emotions only in people who will love us back. When we look to curry favor with the most powerful, then we are once again lifting our own needs above the needs of others and we are once again, loving ourselves more than God or neighbor.

So yes, this story does sound a little bit like a lesson from Emily Post and in these admonitions we do find important lessons about humility and hospitality. But on a deeper level, it is a reminder that all people have great value, whether we recognize it or not.

When I was in middle school, my class was assigned to read an article that asked that question “How much is a person worth?” The author had received a greeting card that suggested the composite materials that make up a human body were actually worth only a few cents. While searching online for that story this week, I found an article that cited Dr. Harry Mosen of Illinois Medical College who wrote

in 1969 that the chemicals in the human body, collectively, were worth about \$.98. He updated his work around 1980 to account for inflation and the rising cost of the various minerals and chemicals involved and re-estimated the value of a person at \$7.28.³ Now I have no idea what is the going rate for calcium and magnesium and iron these days, but simply accounting for inflation, our collective chemical selves ought to be worth around \$18.71 today.⁴

Of course, the technology and skill it would take to compile those chemicals into tissues and those tissues into organs and those organs into a living, breathing person would be in the billions if not trillions of dollars.

So depending on how you look at it, we're either worth a just few dollars or we're priceless. But you can't put a dollar value on a human life, and while this is silly, it makes the point that we all have value and sometimes we assess that value differently.

We can see the difference in how people value lives in the very beginning of this passage when Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath. Now Dropsy is an old term for the swelling of soft tissues due to the accumulation of excess water.⁵ In modern language it is more frequently referred to as edema and is really more of a symptom than a disease.

In healing this man's condition, Jesus once again runs afoul of the Pharisees for his refusal to observe the prohibitions against working on the Sabbath. Jesus heals this man and asks a poignant and telling question of those who would judge him: if it was your child, wouldn't you break the laws to help? If it was your ox, by which you plow fields and perform work and are able to prosper and to support your family, wouldn't you break the laws to rescue it?

The Pharisees remain silent, but Jesus knows the answer and we do too: "of course they would! Who wouldn't?" The Pharisees love their children; they value them and would do anything for them. But Jesus asks "who will value this man? Who will see this man as being as important as their own child?" This man; this nameless, faceless man who is defined only by his illness and his need; this man is as important to Jesus as anyone else. This man is worth breaking the Sabbath laws for. Jesus sees value in him that the Pharisees do not.

Which is a common theme throughout Jesus' ministry: The sinners and tax collectors that most of society deems unworthy, Jesus welcomes; the lepers and the sick that ritual law regards as unclean, Jesus embraces; the poor, the hungry, and the outcasts that many try to avoid or ignore altogether, Jesus blesses and says that to such as these belong the kingdom of God.

You see, Jesus affirmed the value in all people, not because of what they were capable of and not because of what they could do for him, but simply because they were children of God. Period. By placing this little healing story before his account of the banquet and warnings about taking the front seats and inviting the right guests, Luke's Jesus challenges what the Pharisees believe about the value of people.

³ Hendler, Herb, Year by Year in the Rock Era, Greenwood Press, 1983, pg. 227

⁴ <http://www.westegg.com/inflation/>

⁵ <http://www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=13311>

You see, part of the reason the Pharisees want to sit up front close to the host is be close to those who are important so that they too can feel important; they want to interact with the powerful so that they too can become powerful. Which makes sense. Being in the presence of the rich and famous, getting the honor seat at a banquet, or at least getting the shot-gun seat on a long road trip can make you feel good about yourself; but it also gives you the illusion that you are better than you really are.

I'm convinced that so much of what is wrong with so many so called celebrities is that they are constantly told how great and important and wonderful they are and after a while, they begin to believe it. I mean, if you have a reality show and a cadre of photographers following you around all the time, chances are you're going to feel affirmed.

And who doesn't enjoy spending time with people most like them; with family and friends and people who, by their presence, make me look good and help me to feel better about myself?

But for Jesus, no one person is more important than any other. We have value simply because we are children of God, lovingly created in the image of God. You may be able to put a price-tag on our chemical components, but we have value beyond measure because we belong to God.

Which is good news for you and me because it reminds us that God loves and cherishes us in spite of our weaknesses and in spite of our failings and in spite of the wounds and hurts and marks that we've picked up over the years.

It means that we have value in spite of our grades and our job titles and whether or not we've been promoted or whether our children are in the top of their class. It means that we are worthy of God's love and of one another's love, simply because we are. And that is good news.

But it is also a challenge to you and to me, because it reminds us that the people around us, the ones very much like us and the ones that appear so very different, the ones we like and the ones that are hard to love; the ones who welcome us in and the ones who turn away, they are all valuable to God, too. And so we must seek to find ways to love them and to value them just as God does.

I remember my old friend Kenny, who was not technically homeless because he had a place to stay at night, but it wasn't really the kind of home most of us would feel comfortable in. Kenny walked the streets of Clemson most days, looking for a little work, and trying to stay out of trouble with the Police, but life was hard for Kenny.

He used to come by the center every now and then and we would talk if I had time, and sometimes I would buy him lunch.

One of the things I learned about Kenny, was that people wouldn't usually talk to him. He liked to have long conversations about theology and politics, but when he struck up a conversation with someone, they invariably thought he was trying to hit them up for money and they would either give him some or not, but either way, they didn't want to be bothered to spend time with him.

He told me once, "I just want to talk to someone. People are willing to help, but nobody wants to just sit and talk." I realized that day that people we value are people we spend time with.

Often Christians, who thought they were helping by giving money and walking away, were also helping to perpetuate his loneliness and isolation. I was guilty of it too, sometimes. I think back and I wonder how I would have reacted had Kenny been my son; would I have so easily dismissed him? Of course not.

As Children of God, we all have value, but in our culture, we tend to base the value of people on how pretty they are or how undamaged they appear; weakness and brokenness are feared and avoided at all costs. I was thinking about that while looking through my son's books the other day.

My little boys love books.

Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel, Llama Llama Red Pajama, Good Night Moon, they just love books. Some get read over and over to the point that Mary & I could recite them from memory. Those books get read and re-read until the pages are smudged by little fingers sticky from ice cream and juice. The pages are turned over and over until they get ripped and torn. Pop-up books no longer pop up and scratch and sniff books no longer offer their pleasing smells.

Harry, our two, almost three year old, is hardest on books and periodically, Mary will have to tape their pages back together because his little hands have not yet learned to be gentle with soft pages.

At night, when I settle down with Harry to read to him in the big over-stuffed chair that sits bathed in warm lamp light in the corner of his room, the books he enjoys most are the ones most marred by dirt and most often torn and mended with scotch tape.

Yet no matter how badly wrinkled the pages, no matter how many words are obscured by little finger smudges, no matter how bent the covers or broken the bindings, Harry loves them all just the same.

We are all like those books on the shelf. By our outward appearances we may seem to be worn out or broken and not worth the time it would take to open our pages and see the beauty within. The old adage is that you can't tell a book by its cover and there is a great amount of truth to that. Like books, most of us are wrinkled and torn, hard to read and not as pretty and perfect as when we were brand new. But we have great value none-the-less because we are children of God.

For you and I this is an invitation to see the value in everyone, and a challenge to find ways to be involved with our brothers and sisters who seem most different from us and maybe even a little scary. It's challenging and difficult and maybe even counter to good sense sometimes. It is not a license to take risks, but it is reminder to not let risky circumstances deter us from loving one another.

Every day I drive home through the snarl of traffic that has become the intersection of College Avenue and Tiger Boulevard. It is difficult and challenging, but I do not let it deter me from driving home, because getting home is important to me.

And that is no different from seeing the value in others and from loving and being in relationship with those that society has devalued. It will be hard at times and it might even make sense to avoid people who have been cast aside, but if it is important to us as it was to Jesus, then we will find a way.

To God be all glory, power, honor and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.