

WHAT ARE YOU WORTH?

(02/20/2022)

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 139:13-18, 23-24

Luke 15:11-24

“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful; I know that full well.” (Ps. 139:14)

I don't know if you have noticed, but throughout this pandemic, whenever “the numbers” have begun to move downward, it has been possible to obtain some exceptionally good deals on resort vacations in the Caribbean, ocean cruises and river cruises both in the United States and Europe, and package deals of international flights and hotel lodging in places like London, Paris, Rome, and Vienna.

Though Darlene and I have never vacationed in the Caribbean, and we have only taken one cruise, a Disney cruise with our children when they were younger, these are all things I would like to do. I especially would like to spend time in each of the four European cities I mentioned. And I feel like I really need a vacation.

The sane, rational part of me knows this isn't a good idea—at least, not right now. In addition to the “long haulers,” those whose symptoms stubbornly refuse to abate, in addition to those with compromised pulmonary function (like me) who are hospitalized on ventilators, almost a million people in our country alone have died from this virus. The sane, rational part of me questions why I would want to spend time in a petri dish that is shaped like an airplane or, even worse, a cruise ship. Do I really want to become a carrier and infect those I love—or strangers? Am I so impatient to have my life return to “normal,” whatever that is, that I can't wait a few months more? Was I not listening to the plethora of times in my reflections and Keeping in Touch “Quotes of the Week” that I extolled the virtues of patience? Does the expression, “Physician, heal thyself!” mean nothing to me?

Even though I know better, I confess to sometime hearing the voice of ‘the tempter’ (or perhaps it is simply an advertising agency) whisper in my ear, “Go ahead; you deserve it. And just think—you and Darlene could save anywhere up to \$400 apiece in the bargain. As the frugal person you are, how could you possibly pass up a gift of \$800?”

When I “hear” this little dialogue going on inside my head (and no, I am not schizophrenic—I know who it is that is “talking” to me and I only talk back when no one is around to overhear), I think back to the situation immediately following the 9/11 attack on New York City and the Pentagon. Our government responded to the terrorist attack

by immediately shutting down all flights in the United States. For some time after the attack, most of us were wary of going into large cities like Boston, and we were more than wary of boarding an airplane.

The airlines, understandably concerned about their bottom lines, began to offer bargain basement prices on domestic and international flights to lure us back into our normal patterns of life and travel. As documented by some social psychology researchers, an interesting phenomenon then occurred.

I don't remember the exact numbers but, to the best of my recollection, if an airline offered a discount of \$250 on a domestic or international flight, we weren't tempted to take the risk. In fact, we were somewhat insulted--our life was worth more than that! However, if the airline increased the discount to \$400 per flight, they suddenly had a flood of takers! As the researchers pointed out, this implies that, no matter what we think or say, according to our behavior we apparently value our life at \$400; \$400 was all that was needed to get us to take the risk of dying prematurely, suddenly, and painfully. I am not very good at statistics, but I remember thinking at the time that this data suggests that the value we place on our life is closer to \$150—the difference between when we wouldn't run the risk of flying and when we would.

This got me thinking. What are we worth? I'm not thinking about the \$400 offered in travel discounts, which is, apparently, all it would take for some of us to risk life and limb. I'm not talking about the \$37.15 that we could get by melting us down and selling off all the chemicals that are present in our bodies. We are worth a lot more alive than dead—at least I hope we are! I am talking about what we are worth in a bigger sense, what we are *really* worth!

Some people don't have a good sense of their own worth. Because they suffer from low self-esteem, they live out their life on a level far below the level of their actual worth and abilities. They have little sense of their importance, their value in the whole scope of things. There are usually reasons why people feel this way, why they feel they are of little or no value, why they see themselves as damaged goods. And a lot of it really does go back to early childhood trauma and dysfunctional patterns of relationships in the person's family of origin.

I suspect that the younger son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son probably felt this way, though I have no idea why. He grew up in what appears to be a very good family. We know that he had an older brother and a really, *really* good father. There is no mention of his mother. I know that the story is a parable, a teaching, and not Jesus' description of an actual family, but I still wonder about the absence of the mother in the

story. Perhaps she died when the younger brother was just a child. This kind of early childhood loss can be deeply wounding.

The older brother appears to be the shining star in the family. He is what psychologists call a parentified child. He never does anything wrong. He not only lives up to his father's expectations; he exceeds them. He is a hard worker and a loyal son. He lives an upright and moral life. He is probably very much like his father, both in his attitude toward work and in his values. A "chip off the old block."

The younger brother is the rebel. He is tired of living in the shadow of his successful older brother. The younger brother probably doesn't do well in school. He chafes against the expectations of his teachers and the rules of deportment in the classroom, which he experiences as restrictions on his freedom rather than constructive guidelines for living. He doesn't have a clear sense of his identity and what he wants to do with his life. He is sort of wandering through his adolescence. He is probably hanging around with the wrong kids, the wrong crowd. It is not surprising that he gets lost.

In the parable, the son goes to his father and asks for his share of the inheritance. This probably hurt the father's feelings. His son is asking for his inheritance even before the father has died. This makes it sound like the money he can get from his father is more important than his relationship with his father. At the beginning of the parable, we don't have any sense of the son's feelings for his father. It may just be that he is so caught up in himself, in his own struggles with life, that there just isn't any room in his thoughts for other people.

The father, without complaint, without protest, gives the son that for which he asks. The son takes his inheritance and immediately moves away from home. He apparently feels no obligation to help his father run the farm, and he feels no obligation to help take care of his father when his father gets older. Not surprisingly, the money runs through his fingers like water through a sieve. He wastes it on liquor, fast women, and throwing parties for his friends. Before long, all his money is gone. This is when he realizes that his "friends" are not really his friends; they are just using him. When his money is gone, they drop him like a hot potato.

If we look at the story objectively, the son has made a mess of his life. He is reduced to working as a swineherd. This is a job that no self-respecting Jew would ever do. He is so hungry that he feels like competing with the pigs for the garbage they are being fed. He has hit bottom.

If we look at the story objectively, we are led to the inescapable conclusion that the son has made a mess of his life. If we look at his behavior from a moral perspective, what he did was wrong. It was selfish. It was inconsiderate. He did not honor his father and his mother. However, if we look at the story from a psychological perspective, we see it differently. Perhaps this journey into the wilderness was an important part of the son's individuation process, the process by which he becomes himself as a whole person, as a unique person, as a unique incarnation of God. Perhaps the road to self-actualization, *his* road to self-actualization was not the path of living a mistake-free life.

Alcoholics Anonymous, common sense, and our own life experience teaches us that sometimes we have to hit bottom before we turn our life around. I know you know this. Of course, we always hope that we will turn our life around before we hit bottom. Far too many people hit bottom and they either stay there or their life ends prematurely. After their slow and steady descent into the darkness, they are not able to make the ascent back into the light. Unfortunately, as is the case with many addicts and people in the prison system, there is no one there to help them experience the inner transformation they so desperately need.

The son, fortunately, comes to his senses. He decides to return home in the hope that he might be able to build or rebuild his life. He knows he has, to use a religious term, fallen from grace. He has no reason to expect that he will be welcomed back as a son, or that he will be welcomed back at all. He clings to the hope that his father will at least take pity on him and allow him to function as a hired servant.

The father, however, has been waiting for his son. Jesus tells us that the father sees the son coming from afar. When the father sees the young man trudging down the dusty road dressed in rags, it breaks his heart! It breaks his heart from sorrow at what has happened to his son, and his heart breaks with joy at his son's return. The father runs to his son, throws his arms around him, and kisses him. Then he orders that the boy be given fine clothes to wear, new sandals for his feet, and a ring for his finger. That very night a feast will be held to celebrate his homecoming!

The Parable of the Prodigal Son reminds me of a story. A speaker stood in front of a packed auditorium. When he had his audience's attention, he took a crisp new \$100 bill out of his wallet and held it up for everyone to see. Then he asked, "Who would like this \$100 bill?" Everyone's hand shot up.

The speaker then took the \$100 bill and folded it in half. "Now how many of you would like this \$100 bill?" he asked. Every hand went up. The speaker then took the bill and crumpled it up. "Who still wants this bill?" Again, every hand was raised.

Finally, the speaker threw the crumpled \$100 bill on the floor and stomped on it, crushing it with his shoe. He leaned over, picked up the crumpled and dirty money, and asked, “Now who wants this \$100 bill?” Once again, every single hand went up.

The speaker then addressed his audience. “I hope that all of you learned a very important lesson today,” he said. “No matter what I did to this bill, it did not decrease in value. Even though it went through the wringer, it did not decrease in value. It is worth just as much now as it was when I first showed it to you, as much as it was when it was first printed.”

“Your life may be like this \$100 bill,” the speaker said. “You may have been knocked around by life. You may have suffered the effects of circumstances beyond your control, and you may even have played a part in this process by making ill-advised choices. You may feel that you are not worth very much at all, that you are basically a piece of rubbish.”

“I want you to remember,” said the speaker, “that no matter what has happened to you in this life, no matter how low you have fallen, like this bill you never lose your value. You are of incredible value. You are unique in the universe. You are an incarnation of God. There is no one else exactly like you. You are a treasure to God, and you can be a treasure to other people.” The crowd was hushed.

Has something happened to you that has caused you to devalue yourself? Has something happened to you that has led you to feel worthless? Perhaps something was done to you, like physical, sexual, emotional, or verbal abuse. Perhaps something was missing in your life, like a sober parent who could be there for you. Perhaps you tried to dull the pain, the anger, and the depression any way you could. In a short period of time, you might have lost that sense that you are a person of incredible value, that you are both valued and loved by God.

The message of the parable is that no matter what you have done with your life so far, you are a person of worth. You are not rubbish. God loves you, and God is waiting with open arms to welcome you back home. God is waiting like the father in the story to restore you to wholeness, to set your feet back on the path to a meaningful and fulfilling life.

The Japanese Zen Master Morinaga Soko relates the first lesson he learned from Rinzai Zen master Zuigan when Soko began his Buddhist training. One of my favorite

books by Zen Master Soko is *An Ongoing Lesson on the Extent of My Own Stupidity—Novice to Master*. In *Zen: Traditions & Transitions*, Soko is quoted as saying,

The first task I was given was to sweep the garden with a bamboo broom. . . So, I grasped my broom and swept mightily and soon had a mountain of leaves. I asked, “Roshi [which means “venerable teacher], where should I put all this rubbish?” hoping he would see how good I had been. He immediately roared, “Leaves are not rubbish!” . . . Go to the shed and bring any empty charcoal sacks you find there.”

Coming back, I found the Roshi vigorously raking through the pile of leaves so that any stones or gravel fell to the bottom. He then took the sacks and filled them to the very last leaf, packing them tightly with his feet. “Now go put these back in the shed,” he said. “They’re kindling for the bath fire.”

When I . . . came back, I saw the Roshi squatting on the ground picking out the small stones from what remained. When he had carefully gathered them together to the last tiny pebble, he said, “Now put these beneath the eaves.”

I was quite sure that the remaining lumps of earth and scraps of moss could serve no useful purpose. Yet the Roshi just collected them together without fuss and placed them on the palm of his hand. Searching patiently, he put the lumps of earth into depressions in the ground, then firmed them in with his foot until nothing remained.

He said, “Now do you understand a little? Originally, there is no rubbish in either people or things.” This was the first teaching I received from Zuigan Roshi, [1879-1965, Master of the Daishun Temple in Kyoto, Japan].

Soko then says,

The Roshi’s words that originally there is no rubbish either in people or in things actually comprise the basic truth of Buddhism.

The writer of the 139th psalm came to this very conclusion approximately 4,000 years ago. He says (or prays) to God,

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.*

The psalmist realizes that above all he is a child of God. He is one of the wonders of creation. He tells God,

*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.*

If we were to ask Morinaga Soko or Zuigan Roshi what the buddha-nature at the center of every sentient being, actually of every single thing, is worth, they would simply

laugh. If we were to ask the psalmist what he was worth as a child of God, he would simply laugh. If we were to ask the early disciples what the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of their risen Lord that dwells within the depth of their soul is worth, they would simply laugh. If we were to ask the prodigal son what he is worth to his heavenly Father, he would say “More than I ever imagined.”

So, what are you worth? More than you can possibly imagine! So, what are we as a church worth? More than we can possibly imagine! Beginning today let us start living our life out of this realization both as individuals and as a church!

*A reflection shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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