

Sermon

12 Pentecost

What am I worth?

Jeremiah 2:4-13
Psalm 81:1, 10-16
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:1, &-14

We have an amusing little scenario this morning in our gospel scripture...and it's probably a scene that all of us can relate to. Who among us has not wanted to be recognized by our superiors as being a valuable employee? Who among us has not longed to be celebrated by our peers as a really important and trustworthy person? Do any of you remember your high school years? How many of you wanted to be the star football player responsible for winning the game against your toughest rivals? And how many of the girls secretly wished that their peers thought them attractive enough to make them Homecoming Queen? If it wasn't the football game or the Homecoming Queen, think for a minute how you measured your own worth? How did you know that you were valuable? What made you feel special? We use any number of measuring sticks to determine our own worth...and that's important. Each one of us wants to feel valuable...and worthy...and respected...and admired...and trusted. Sometimes we think we can accomplish that with a bank account. Sometimes we think we will achieve that by being publicly honored for our accomplishments. Each one of us looks for ways to reassure ourselves that we are important...that we are loved...that we are worth something...that we are special in our own right. It seems to be human nature to want these things for ourselves. It's reassuring to us when some honor is bestowed on us. It establishes the fact that we are worth something to others...and that in itself is important. Where do we fit in the pecking order among the other human beings that populate our daily lives? What are we worth? How valuable a human being are we? All good questions and all questions that we mull over to ourselves even if we shy away from being consciously aware of it. We all want to know our value and we all want to be reassured that we are worth something!! We get that kind of information from two sources: from other human beings and from within ourselves. Each one of us carries an internal measuring stick of standards to live by and accomplishments to strive for to determine just where we fit in the world. And there's nothing wrong with longing for that kind of information. Wanting that kind of information is part of what makes us human and this is the way God made us. Having made us this way, God is looking to see how we're going to handle it. What price are we willing to pay to reassure ourselves that we are valuable people? What rules are we willing to break? Which people are we willing to hurt? What's our prize if we manage to maneuver ourselves to the top of the human heap? And if we did maneuver ourselves to the top of the heap, was it worth the price we paid? Every single one of us struggles with these questions and with the choices we make to build our own self esteem.

Jesus teaches us universally valuable lessons crafted in the world in which Jesus was operating, where the social structure was based on shame and honor. Those two descriptions of behavior determined where a person fit in. A person's worth in that society was based on the individual's behavior and accomplishments as well as a keen knowledge of the rules in which he was operating. In this social structure, women had no place other than to take care of the needs of men and children. This social structure was a shame and honor society. It was a social disaster to bring shame on the entire family as a result of one's behavior. Everyone in the family suffered if the male head of the household was rejected by his peers. It not only had social consequences, it also had economic consequences. No one wanted to do business with someone they couldn't trust. The men were keenly aware of what others thought of them and where they fit among them. It was a terrible and painful thing to live in a household draped in shame. The women and the children reflected the worth of the oldest male in the household. If he was revered by his peers then so were they. If he was shamed and excluded by his peers, they were as well. It was a family affair and had far-reaching consequences for all of them.

In the midst of this kind of culture, Jesus found himself a guest at a banquet. He quietly observed how people seemed to be jockeying for position to see who could sit closest to the host which was quite an honor. It was a terrible mistake to decide to sit too close to the host and force him to move you down several places. It was shameful and painful and embarrassing. No one fully recovered from having that happen to them nor did their family. Jesus took that opportunity to explain what was most prized by God and the difference between the standards human males used to judge one another and the standards that God used.

Two thousand years later, we human beings are still struggling with what WE think is important and what we know God thinks is important. In many instances it's a question of whether or not we trust God more than we trust our own instincts and judgement. In the parable Jesus tells in which he advises people to select a seating place below where they thought they belong so that they might earn the favor and justification of the host who might then invite them to move to a more prestigious spot at the table. Far better for that to be the outcome than to shoot too high in terms of estimating one's own worth and value to others and be put down, embarrassed, and belittled by the host who would then choose a seat of lower status.

Each one of us knows what it feels like to want to 'prove' ourselves by our accomplishments that label us as 'successful' and 'valuable' people. We human beings seem to have been born with this natural instinct to want to prove ourselves and then look to others' judgements of us to see how we measure up. Once again Jesus has chosen to focus on a universal human

problem which is focused on our own sense of ourselves...our own self-worth if you will...and what measuring stick we use to determine where we fit in the social strata in which we find ourselves. To want to be successful seems to be human nature. To want to be valued by our peers is an ingrained part of us. We all want to be noticed for our talents and our contributions to others. Such strivings to be noticed and complimented and valued seem to be universal among human beings. Each one of us wants to be validated that we are important; that we are successful; that we are valued by our peers. Desiring that kind of validation and attention seems to be inbred in each of us. It's part of what makes us human. Striving for personal success and the validation of our peers seems to be something we are born with. It's part of what makes us human. And like so many other very human characteristics, Jesus chooses to zero in on this one and steer us toward a different direction.

It's not that there's anything wrong with wanting to be successful...in proving to ourselves and perhaps to nearly everyone else that we are valuable and competent and worthy of respect and admiration. Jesus is focusing on a very human natural inclination and showing us that what we think is important...really ISN'T that important and the measuring stick that God uses is different from the one we are using.

God values different attributes in human beings than we do. We value the person who has figured out 'how to get ahead.' We have come to value the person who has been especially successful in their chose line of work or has become skilled at self-promotion. We tend to admire the one who seems to know how to steer the spotlight to themselves. Sometimes we may feel even a little jealous of those folks, but there's no need to. God tends to have a different set of standards for admiration than we do. We tend to forget to measure our fellow human beings by how generous they are with people who cannot pay them back; how kind they are to people who are normally left out or shunned by their peers; how quiet they are about their own accomplishments; how truly humble they are in a very discreet way; how little they think of accumulating accolades for themselves and how much they lift up others for their accomplishments.

Most of the people who know anything about her consider Mother Teresa to be one of the most devout and outstanding Christians that has ever lived. From our vantage point she lived the kind of life that Christ teaches us to live. Most people genuinely admire her and wish they could be more like her. But if you've read much about Mother Teresa, you know that she was plagued with self-doubt. She worried quite a lot about whether or not she was doing what God wanted her to do. She struggled over being able to see whether or not what she was doing was helping anyone at all. She struggled with feelings of failure on a regular basis. She didn't think much about what *she* wanted; but she thought a great deal about what she believed God

wanted her to do and her willingness and ability to do it. Few human beings have lived out the legacy of Jesus Christ more faithfully than she did. She set a fine example for us all and earned her seat at the head of the table.

May we take notice of all those who follow Christ who have successfully set aside their own thirst for adoration and their own ambition to be lauded by their peers. May we hear the words of Jesus and believe what he said to us. When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. Don't ponder too much about your standing in this life. If you follow what Jesus has instructed, you will be celebrated in the next one.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.