

Sermon for Sunday, June 21, 2020 - "The Value of Life"

Third Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

Click [here](#) to read scripture passages for the day.

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

This Gospel reading is pretty intense. I wish Jesus had a different message for us on Father's Day. Something a little more peaceful and uplifting would be so welcome this weekend!

And yet today, Jesus speaks to a very pressing question for us right now - what is the value of a life? Policy makers and all of us are having to wrestle with that question these days. What impacts on the economy are we willing to accept in order to reduce deaths from COVID-19? What impositions on our own freedom and comfort are we willing to tolerate in order to flatten the curve of this virus? This question is often framed as a false dichotomy - do we sacrifice the economy or sacrifice human life? Framing the question that way feels like a failure of the imagination. Jesus' challenging words today help us to imagine and enter a new way of being.

What is the value of a life? Jesus speaks to this question as he sends us to be his disciples in a dangerous world. He sends us to face hatred, violence, division and "those who kill the body". And even as he asks us to be willing to risk our own lives for the sake of his work, Jesus is clear that God values all life.

To illustrate this, Jesus draws our attention to an insignificant sparrow. Sparrows were very low on the pecking order in the ancient world. They were the food of the poor. They sold two-for-a penny in the market. Yet, Jesus says even the sparrow receives God's attention; even their lives and deaths are not beneath God's care.

This passage inspired schoolteacher Civilia Martin to write the lyrics to the song "His Eye Is on the Sparrow", the gospel hymn that confesses, "I know he watches me." This image, God's eye on the sparrow, has struck such a chord in the Black church. For Black Americans, the issue of the value of a life is not at all abstract. They know that the lives and freedom of their ancestors were sacrificed for the sake of the American economy.

They know that they were viewed as units of production, as marks in the ledger books that listed assets: cotton, sugar, slaves. As one historian puts it, there were "marks where human beings once stood." Black Americans also know that now, in the data about COVID-19, their lives continue to be marked as expendable statistics worth risking for the sake of the economy. To sing that God's eye is on the sparrow is a way to proclaim the truth that God values those the world overlooks. God values Black lives, nursing home residents, elders, prisoners, immigrants, workers in meat packing plants.

God is also concerned with the ways that devaluing the lives of others kills the souls of everyone.

When some are viewed as expendable this not only inflicts material harm on those who are most vulnerable, it inflicts spiritual harm on us all. We become enslaved to the power of greed, pride, racism and white supremacy. We become isolated, anxious, and self-centered. We strive and grasp and hoard. We seek our own security at the cost of our others. We can't imagine how to order our economy in ways that value the flourishing of life.

When we live this way, we lose out on the life God intends for us. God created us to live together in harmony. Each precious life that God so values is bound together with all other life. When one life is diminished, we are all diminished. Our well-being is connected to the well-being of all creation.

Yet we can't recognize this when we are so focused on ourselves. It is only when we lose our self-centered lives that we find the life abundant that God longs for us to know.

So, Jesus calls us to lose our lives in order to find them. We are to stop trying to secure our own lives, to let go of our tight hold on what we see as our own. We are to join in acts of sacrifice, service and prayer. We are to follow in the way of Jesus.

The way of Jesus is a challenge to the ways and powers of this world. Following in the way of Jesus can cause others to feel offended, affronted, threatened. It can lead to division, even within our own families. Our lives become less comfortable. There is risk and sacrifice. Yet, following this way of Jesus frees us from the death dealing aspects of our culture and opens us to abundant life.

And lest this we think following this way of Jesus depends upon us, the reading from Romans today reminds us that in baptism we have already died with Christ Jesus and been raised to walk with him in newness of life. In baptism, we are set free from the power of sin. This means that losing our lives to find them does not depend on our strength or effort or willpower. Instead, we are called to daily turn to the power of God that is at work to set us free each day, to raise us to new life each day. This power makes it possible for us to follow in the way of Jesus.

Jesus also reminds us that we have real and abiding security in the God who cares for the sparrow, the God who values all life. God's eye is on the sparrow and on each one of us. We are secure in God's care and attention, now and forever. With that assurance, we can follow Jesus into work that disrupts and heals the world.

We can challenge systems that devalue the lives of others.
We can remain steadfast amidst turmoil and struggle.
We can follow Jesus into death and abundant life.

Beloved of God, your life has incredible value.
You have been joined to the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus.
You are set free from the power of sin.
You can join Jesus in the care and redemption of all that God has made.

Let's take a moment for prayer.