

## **"The Worth of a Person"**

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9; James 2:1-5

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

July 16, 2017 – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

If you were to go to a certain courthouse in Virginia, you could ask to see the will of a prosperous man from that area. At the time of his death much of his property was in slaves, so the owner listed them individually. Beside each he put their worth.

Next to one man's name was the figure \$200. That amount, the owner speculated, would be a fair estimate of what this particular person might bring on the open market. Though it might seem abhorrent to us that a human life could have a dollar amount assigned, it wasn't then and in that place. That Negro slave, whose value was listed as \$200, proved later as a free man how absurd such a figure could be.

What about his former owner? After all, he was a prominent man in his community at the time. His wealth set him apart. His plantation was the envy of his neighbors. Many would have gladly changed places with him. So what of this man today? He is largely forgotten.

And the slave who could have been bought for only a few bills—what of him? Having received the opportunity of an education he, in turn, spent his life as an educator of others. This man later did pioneering research in agriculture and his work is still significant today.

The slave owner has slipped into oblivion. The former slave has been given a place among noted Americans. In fact, he's still so respected in our nation that his name can be found in most standard dictionaries. You'll find him listed just after our nation's capital and just before our first President. Look there and you see him included as "Washington, Booker T."

History remembers the former slave and mocks the thought that a dollar figure could have ever been attached to the caliber of a man such as he. This story speaks to the folly of judging a person's true worth by outward circumstances, whether that be color of skin or wealth or position or anything else.

We find a similar caution in our scripture this morning from James. In writing, as he says in his greeting, to "all God's people scattered over the whole world, " James lays out practical guidance for Christian attitudes and conduct. Here he is especially concerned with what happens when believers gather for worship.

"My brothers and sisters," he writes, "how can you claim you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, if you show favoritism to rich people and look down on the poor?"

"If a person comes into your church dressed in expensive clothes with gold rings on his fingers, and at the same time another person comes in who is poor and dressed in threadbare clothes, and you make a fuss over the rich one and give to that person the best seat in the house, while to the one who is poor you say, 'You can stand over there if you like, or else sit on the floor,' doesn't this judging of a person by wealth show you are guided by wrong motives?"

Here James reacts to common life he sees within the church. He writes, in this instance, about allowing unexamined practices to become the norm within congregational life. Specifically, he cites how easy it is to become discriminatory in our welcome to others.

This tendency toward favoritism has seemingly always been a problem to the church. Not so much because it is generated within Christian communities, but because it is the prevailing way of the world. We have always looked at people with an eye to their outer circumstances. Physical appearance, social standing, money, job, and education are typical criteria by which people are judged and valued in society.

None of these exterior factors, however, define the real qualities of a person, for these are always a matter of the inner self. We see Jesus as one who was consistent in the way he treated people. He resisted the natural tendency to evaluate persons on the surface; instead, he took time to look deeper into their souls. He saw individuals for the real men and women they were, and always related to them on that basis.

Years ago the British playwright J. M. Barrie wrote a satire about a pompous English lord and his high-strung daughter. They, along with several of their servants, become shipwrecked on a remote island. Thankfully, among those in the retinue is a versatile and enterprising butler.

As it turns out it isn't the wealthy lord who holds things together and makes survival possible, though he initially tries. It ends up to be the butler who has the skills and leadership needed.

Eventually this servant emerges as the natural lord of the island and as such is then served accordingly by his former master and mistress. Once removed from an environment where lesser circumstances dominate, a person's true worth and possibilities quickly surface.

No doubt this is the vision Paul had in mind when he thought of the church. As he writes in Galatians, he saw these faith communities as places where "...there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free persons, between men and women... all are one in Christ."

To Paul it wasn't so much who you were, but who you are; not so much what you possess materially, but what you bring spiritually; not so much your social standing, but your social-mindedness.

Within the Christian family, as on a desert isle, ordinary ways of looking at things are turned upside-down. We are not locked into the prevailing ways of the world, unless we choose to be.

If a sociologist was to come in today and evaluate our church, she would probably find us an interesting group. We represent a cross-section of life. Here you'll find persons born within a few miles of our location as well as those born far away from here and even on other continents. Some of us are on fixed incomes; some of us have received government assistance; some of us are comfortably well off. Our formal education ranges from high school to the doctoral level. We reside in Dublin or Powell or Columbus or in half a dozen other locations.

Some of us have positions which provide great meaning. Others have jobs which are only a means to an end. Some of us are between employment. Our age mixture extends from children to those in their 90's. A few of us are strikingly attractive, some rather plain, most somewhere in the middle.

But there are two common characteristics which run through our whole congregation and are a defining part of each of us. First is our common faith in God, as revealed through Christ. The second is our desire to be together in Christian community and to live, grow, and serve within this fellowship of God's people.

We know Highlands is not perfect, nor should we expect that it ever will be. While dedicated to Christ's service, it is a very human institution even when functioning at its best. The church reflects in itself our own imperfections as individuals. That isn't to say that we shouldn't strive for betterment; however, perfection and infallibility are a bit beyond our grasp.

James would remind us this morning that within our diversity there is no room for arrogance. If we cannot be as sincere in welcoming a person of lesser means to our worship as we would be in greeting a person of affluence, then we have lost the sense of what we are about.

If we discriminate within our congregation on the basis of social prominence or outward appearance, age or differing characteristics, or the ability to sing on pitch (except for the pastor), then we have forgotten Christ who preached to everyone, even those some regarded as the outcasts of society. Our Welcome Statement printed in every bulletin speaks to this concern. Even political differences will not separate us unless we let them.

Another apostle puts it this way: "God is love and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them.... We love because God first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

To really love persons is to treat them fairly and with respect. It is to understand ourselves as equals within the body of Christ, each with our own skills and abilities to contribute. To love in this way is to see the real person before us independent of outward circumstances, and then to relate on that basis.

We are all brothers and sisters in Christ, and that means we're family. We're deserving of each other's attention and love, and we need to be ready to extend our family circle when others would seek to be part of this fellowship as well. We need to remember that all have worth in God's sight and we are not to act as gatekeepers to filter people out'

When the church has forgotten this core tenet over the years it has strayed far from Jesus' teaching and desire. When it has been inclusive and celebrated the diversity of God's creation, then it's promise has shone like a bright light in the darkness.

Christ shows us how to be and what to do. If we love him, let us not fail him.