

Service for Zion, July 2, 2017 – Canada Day
Hymns: The Island Hymn; 339 - He's Got the Whole World;
694 – This is my commandment; 800 - O Canada
Scripture: Psalm 8; Mark 7:24-30
Sermon Title: The Value of Life

Psalm 8 (responsive)

Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory in the heavens.

*Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold
to silence the foe and the avenger.*

*When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,*

*what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?*

*You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honour.*

Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Mark 7:24-30

Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

"First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

"Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."

She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Canada, among the nations of the world, is a beacon for the value we place upon human life. Although we sometimes, tragically, place a greater emphasis on economic expediency or human freedom of choice than we do upon the sanctity of human life, particularly the life of the most vulnerable, nevertheless, in Canada, we try. We continue to try. The response to the Residential Schools issue, and the inquiry into murdered and missing aboriginal women, is a sign that we are still trying to adequately value the lives of our indigenous people, so often undervalued and devalued in the recent Canadian past.

When is a life without value? It is a big question, this; our denomination is struggling with the issue of physician assisted death even now, having been asked by our government for input. When is a life without value? At what point can we say, “This life is no longer justified. This life no longer matters. This life is without value.”? At what point, or to whom, can this be said? Who is to judge?

In the context of the last century, societies have made such judgements. Often. The countries of Europe seemingly decided that the lives of countless young men were without value, and between 1914 and 1918, sacrificed millions to the mud and trenches of a few hundred square kilometres of otherwise uninteresting ground. Brass plaques on our church walls bear testament to such a devaluation.

In 1915 the Ottoman Empire decided that Armenian lives were without value, and engaged in the wholesale slaughter of men, women and children in a systematic and coordinated attempt to obliterate an entire people. Centuries of European anti-Semitism coalesced in Nazi Germany and began a process we now call the Holocaust which made the Ottoman attempt pale in comparison; the devaluation of Jewish life led to the murder of some six million men, women and children throughout Europe and Russia. Nazi doctrine also declared the mentally and physically infirm to be lives without value, and sent them to join the equally valueless Jews. Gypsies and homosexuals were considered every bit as undesirable. Their lives also no longer mattered. Their lives were no longer justified. They too were thrown away.

In the early 1930s, Joseph Stalin determined the lives of Ukrainians to be of lesser value than Russian lives, shipped all the food out of the Ukraine, and left millions to starve. We don't have time to detail the devaluation of Serbian lives by the Croats, Croats by the Serbs, Tutsis by the Hutus, Hutus by the Tutsis, and on, and on, and on. Each of these examples featured the devaluation of human life; that someone else's life was judged to be without value. The devaluation of life requires that a person is changed to a thing, from a human being to an object. An object of no value. An object that can then be thrown away. The twentieth century was very, very good at objectifying and devaluing lives. It did so on an industrial scale. In our 21st century, this sad tradition continues, with the ISIS death cult, and its other international branch offices.

When is a life without value? When does a person become a thing? When they are far away? When they are hopelessly poor? When they are of a different nationality, a different ideology, a different faith, or of no faith at all? When their values do not agree with ours? When they are the oppressor? When they are the oppressed? When they are of no economic value? When they are terminally ill? When they are grievously disabled? When they are very old? When they are very young? When they are unborn, not yet fully formed, awash in their mother's womb? When is a life without value? When does a person become an object, when does a person become a thing?

It is not a new question. It is as old as Abel and Cain. And it is a question which Jesus answered time and again. Jesus valued the deaf, the blind, the sick, the lame. Jesus valued the poor, the outcast, the foreigner, the shamed. Jesus valued the tax collector, the publican, the sinner, the whore. “How dare you,” people said to Jesus. “God does not value such people as these. God values us, not them. These people are of no more value than a dog.”

“And yet God values even a sparrow,” says Jesus. *“Surely, even the least of these is of greater value than a sparrow.”*

Jesus tells story upon story, shares example upon example. A man, a foreigner, a pagan, unclean, living among the tombs, dangerous, mad, tormented by legion of demons. This man is healed by Jesus. *“Tell your friends how much the Lord loves you, how much he has done for you,”* says Jesus. And the man’s own people ask Jesus to leave.

A Roman – the hated, pagan oppressor Roman – a Centurion, no less, symbol of the evil power grinding the nation into dust. “If you would but speak the word,” says the Roman to Jesus, “my servant will be healed.” Jesus’ response? *“Now that’s faith! It is done.”*

Or from our New Testament passage this morning, when we read of a Syro-Phoenecian woman. A woman! A pagan woman! An unclean, worthless, pagan woman! She dares – dares! – to approach the master. She dares – dares! – ask healing for her daughter. Jesus reads the disciples’ thoughts. *“Why should I take what is for the children and give it to the dogs?”* he asks this woman of no worth, saying out loud what the others were thinking. *“Even the dogs get the crumbs which fall from the children’s plates,”* she says. Jesus, with a radiant smile, answers her prayer, recognises her worth.

A more familiar Bible story: A victim of a vicious mugging is left for dead on the side of the road. A priest passes by, recoils in horror, hurries to the other side of the road. “Quite right,” think the hearers. A Levite, on his way to important work at the Temple, does the same. “As he should,” think the hearers. A Samaritan – booo! A hated Samaritan! Lowest of the low! Despised by all thinking people! Not a person, a thing! – a Samaritan passes by. Sees the object which once was a man, laying in a pool of bloodied sand. Runs over. Cleans him up. Binds his wound. Trickle wine down his throat. Somehow gets him on the mule, brings him to an inn. “Whatever it takes,” he says to the innkeeper. “Here’s a downpayment, I’ll be back with more.”

“Which one was the neighbour to the beaten man?” asks Jesus. *“The one who helped him,”* admits the lawyer, through gritted teeth, not quite bringing himself to say,

“The Samaritan.” And so Jesus redefines our neighbour as the one in need of our help, our protection, our assistance, our love. The one in whom others see no value. That one is our neighbour. That is the one we are to love as ourselves.

Here’s one that will surprise you. Children! Children, in the time of Jesus, were regarded as objects. Chattel. A possession. Ox, mule, cart, child, two goats... possessions. A child was regarded as not quite human, as having value, sure, much as a goat has value, but a child’s value was of a different sort. A child had potential value. A child was a drain on the resources of the family, expensive. But a child could grow to an adult, and as an adult, would be able to contribute to the family welfare, perhaps even care for the parents when the years would dim their strength. The value of a child was entirely potential. But Jesus changed that. Listen to how it goes:

Then little children (“little” being those as yet unable to productively work) were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them.

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these... I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me.”

(Matthew 19:13 Matthew 18:3 Mark 9:37)

What Jesus did with children is change them from objects of potential value to persons of intrinsic value. And he did the same with all the aforementioned: deaf, blind, sick, lame, poor, outcast, widow, foreigner, tax collector, publican, sinner, orphan. All those whom society had determined were offensive, inconvenient, a drain on resources, of no economic, cultural or potential value. “*And yet,*” said Jesus, in word and in deed, “*they are loved by God. They have value. Every bit as much as you.*” He said that. Repeatedly. He believed that. He treated people as though he believed that. And they killed him for it.

Sure, they killed him for that *and* for other things too. But primarily that. Look at it from the perspective, though, of those who killed Jesus, of those who set him up. Think of how his message sounded in their ears. It is hard to hear, after a lifetime of believing to the contrary, that you are in fact no more or no less special than the next guy. Of no more or less value. Of no more or less worth. It is hard to hear that God doesn’t love you more than the next guy, that instead God so loved “the world,” that he gave his Son so that “everyone” might know salvation. Not just the special folks. Not just the productive and the hearty and the cultured and the good. Everyone.

Turn that around, though, and a greater truth shines through. No matter how you view yourself, you are special. You are loved. You are not of less value or less worth

than anyone else. God loves you so much that he gave his Son, so that you could experience salvation, so that you could know what love is. Not just the special folks. Not just the productive and the hearty and the cultured and the good. God loves you. You are a person of great worth, real worth, intrinsic worth. No matter how or how often you have screwed up, or disappointed, or failed to live up to potential, or shied away, or backed down, or took the easy way out, or let down everyone who ever really mattered to you. The point it is, you matter. Your life matters. You are loved by God. You have value. Precisely because of God's love for you, you have value.

All human life is of value. All human life may not have economic or social or cultural or aesthetic or political or national or, what seems to be most important in our culture, entertainment value, but all life has value. Inherent value. Value in and of itself. From the moment of life's inception to the moment of its end, all humanity has the inherent value of being loved by God. And you love the things you value. And you value the things you love. And that, very simply, is the value of life.

We are called to love the people God loves. We are called to value the people God values. Even the people it is inconvenient, difficult, unrealistic, unpopular, uncomfortable, or societally unacceptable to love. Why? Because God loves them. God values them. They have inherent value. And that has to be good enough.

The Early Church took Jesus seriously on this point. So seriously, that although they themselves were economically challenged and had precious little to spare and were often not too confident of where today's bread might come from and not all too sure about tomorrow's; although they couldn't even dream about RRSPs and investments and portfolios and the rest; nonetheless, they recognised that there were people who needed help even more than they. And so they helped them.

The group with whom they started were widows. The Bible talks about widows a fair bit, and expresses concern for their situation. Widows, you see, were in a tough spot. Upon the husband's death, all the family's resources and wealth would go to the eldest son, or failing that, to the brother of the man who died. The widow was left destitute, "dependent," as Blanche DuBois says, "on the kindness of strangers." Those widows without family support, often unable to work or find work, were left to beg or to starve. India's way of solving this problem was the custom of "suttee," where a widow would throw herself on the flaming funeral pyre of her husband. How could a culture let this happen? How could a culture encourage such an unspeakable practice? Because widows had ceased to be of any value. They were no longer people. They were no longer productive. They had no part to play. They were a burden. They were "things."

And so the first Christians, responding to the need of the least valued and most vulnerable within their society, reached out. Providing food. Providing dignity.

Providing purpose. Proving that all – even widows – were of value. They then extended the same benefits to orphans, who were simply worthless children without even the potential value of someday contributing to a family.

What the Early Church did with widows and orphans, is what Jesus did with children, and Samaritans, and Romans, and the disabled, and the destitute, and the foreigner, and the prostitute, is to change them from objects of no value or potential value to persons of intrinsic value. They mattered. They mattered.

When is a life without value? When does a person become an object, become a thing? Only, I suppose, when they are not loved, not valued by God. And if Jesus is anything to go by – Jesus, who from the cross, prayed for the very ones who put him there, who laughed at him there, who taunted him, scorned him, who mocked – if Jesus is anything to go by, God hasn't found a person of no value yet. What he found, was you. And he loves you. And he'll never stop.

The response of those first Christians is a reflection on how we might respond today. Who, in our world, in our society, in our neighbourhoods, are the undervalued, the devalued, those regarded as worthless, of no consequence, a burden? Who speaks for them? Who acts for them? Who reaches out a compassionate hand, and says, in life-affirming word and life-saving deed, "You matter. You have value. You are loved. God loves you, and I will do what I can, where I can, when I can, with what I have, to make that love come to you through me. You matter. I matter. We both matter to God."

When is a life without value? At what point can we say, "This life is no longer justified. That life no longer matters. This person is without value, is beneath my concern."? At what point, or of whom, can this be said? Who is to judge? Only God is capable of judging such things. And God, in Jesus Christ, has made the position clear: All humanity has the inherent value of being loved by God. You. Me. All. And that, very simply, is the value of life.

May our nation of Canada ever seek to be a beacon of hope for those whom others judge to be of no value. May our nation of Canada ever seek to be a refuge and a sanctuary for those seeking a life of safety, of peace, of a future for themselves and their children. May we who know the love of God ever and always bring the undervalued to our government's attention, and call our leaders to account.

Above all, may we who are valued by God, reflect God's love for us and for all people in how we live, and for whom we live, each and every day. Amen.