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Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

VALUES

We all have an interior organizing system that tells us what is valuable and what is not - and then something happens where a reassessment is required. A man who was on his way to a beach wedding was wearing an expensive Italian handmade suit. As he thought about the joyful gathering to which he was heading, he suddenly heard a young cry for help. He looked to the surf and saw a child caught in a rip tide in critical danger of drowning. At this moment, don't ask him what he paid for the suit or what he would wear to the wedding. He quickly discards his coat, shirt, and shoes and runs into the surf for he has suddenly seen something of greater value that could be lost.

During the period of time when pioneers in this country were moving west, trying to get to California and Oregon, they faced quite a journey. Everything they had wanted to take with them, they carefully packed on their Conestoga wagon. Day by day through the summer and into the autumn, they made progress toward their destination. But then they came to the Rocky Mountains, and the first snow was beginning to fall. With the wagons loaded with all of their possessions and the steep climb ahead, the horses were pulling with all of their might, but they couldn't keep going. A reassessment was made. The wagons had to be unburdened to make it over the mountains before winter would set in. It was a hard thing, but left by the side of the trail was furniture that had been handed down through the family, heavy chests of precious things. A more modern version of a similar decision-making process came when those who knew they were in the approaching path of a hurricane had to decide what to take with them as they left their houses. A list was made - that which was considered most valuable was gathered and other things got left behind.

A large group of people were at a Sunday evening concert, enjoying life, when shots began to ring out, and short-term and then longer-term priorities changed. The sudden, life-altering events of a particular day can leave us dazed and confused. What is important? What has value? A man named Saul already had good answers to those questions for his life. He hadn't been a rich man, but it didn't matter because his sense of identity, his family tree, his connections and community standing all enriched his life. But then, when he was on his way to a city named Damascus, he had an encounter that changed his whole value system. This event so transformed his sense of identity that he took on a new name – he would now be called Paul. What he did with his time and energy along with his God-given talents totally changed as a result of meeting Someone who redefined God and love and purpose to him. There were a lot of things about his former life that he could have rightly bragged about. He had accomplished much. He was held in high esteem. But all of that had no significance for him now. He had all new goals, a new purpose in life. What had been of value to him previously had all changed.

Every now and then something will happen – it could be a health episode, a change in a job or significant relationship, or something even smaller that leads us to realize that our priorities and values may not be consistent with the best that we know. We can go through life spending a lot of money on that which doesn't have a meaningful impact on our world. We can chase after popularity and acclaim, running ourselves ragged. We can try to fill our days and nights with that which would constantly entertain us, ever trying to distract ourselves from the emptiness of our existence. But then something leads us to reassess what we find of value.

How do we go about that process? The nineteenth Psalm looks first to the beauty and wonder of creation and therein recognizes an appropriate awe for the One who stands behind creation, sort of like there is a large book all around us telling us of God. The psalmist then lovingly describes the gift of scriptures, the small book to which we go that further helps us explore what God values, including us and our sisters and brothers, many of whom we've not yet even

met. The psalmist finds much value in an encounter with the God of creation followed by an encounter with the God revealed in scripture. But then at the end of the psalm is an invitation to allow God to shape us and our values. I often use that verse as a prayer for illumination before preaching, but it can serve as a prayer for illumination for non-preachers too. “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart” (and let me add explicitly ‘and the actions and values of my life’) “be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”

How can that such a prayer be answered? Remember the Apostle Paul, whom I mentioned earlier? How did he put his life in accord with the values of the Creator of the universe, the same One who speaks to us in the love story of scripture? Paul says, he is on a journey to move toward that, not that he has reached the goal; but he pressed on to make it his own, because (and this is the critical line) “because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” Paul wanted to take hold of Christ as Christ had taken hold of him. Before Paul or any of us could press on, Christ pressed on to redeem us, to take hold of us. He pressed on, leaving heavenly glory behind to come to us in human form. He pressed on through Bethlehem where a jealous king tried to kill him. He pressed on through Nazareth where his own neighbors didn’t recognize him for who he was and threatened to run him off a cliff. He pressed on through various villages, preaching and teaching, bringing God’s wholeness that frankly wasn’t always welcomed. Oh, there were those who shouted “Hosanna” when he entered Jerusalem, but there were others plotting his demise. He pressed on to an upper room to dine with those who would betray or deny or desert him. He pressed on to a garden where his friends couldn’t manage to watch with him and where soldiers came to arrest him. He pressed on through a mock trial, pressed on through being flogged, through being nailed to a cross, from which he would pray, “Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they do.” He pressed on to death where he broke death’s hold, upon himself and upon us. Christ pressed on to redeem you and me so we could see his self-giving example and have defined the way for us to discover the values that make sense, that can structure our lives and choices.

Events in the world seem to be a bit crazy recently. Perhaps it is a good time to reassess the value of some good things in our lives – that which we have counted on for security, that which has set our agenda, that prestige that we might have counted on for our self-esteem. To be ready to walk out of this sanctuary back into this world, God’s world, we who follow the Christ, might need a different value system. In these days, “let the words of our mouths, the meditation of our hearts, the values of our lives be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.” Amen.