

## VALUE AND WORTH

Luke 10: 38-42; 22: 24-27; Jeremiah 31: 31-34

How important are you? What value and worth do you possess as a person? Well, most of us would like to think we're pretty important and valuable as human beings, no?

But how do we measure our value and worth? Well according to popular social norms, it's all about what we do for a living, how much money we make, how many possessions we have. In business terms, it's about a person's worth in dollar figures. Or we measure our worth in our achievements and accomplishments, our degrees in school, our awards in sports or the arts, even our recognitions through our volunteering. It's all about what we do. Or else, we measure our worth through our relationships and how much we are recognized and praised by people around us, from our parents, to our children, to our brothers and sisters, our friends and neighbours, our colleagues or those in different community groups and associations we are a part of.

I can go on and on, but I think we get the picture. It's hard to estimate our value and worth simply by being ourselves. Somehow, we have to measure ourselves in relationship and comparison to others. We need some way of measuring and some way of accounting for what we have done or can do.

But let me ask two questions in the face of this kind of thinking. First, does it work? Does it work to measure our value and worth in relationship to other people or according to quantitative achievements and accomplishments? Some of us may think it works, especially if we are accomplished doers, much loved and appreciated by others, and valued in terms of what role we play in our communities and the groups we belong to. We feel good about ourselves because others tell us we're good and the world recognizes our abilities and accomplishments.

But doesn't this also make us vulnerable? Doesn't this keep us insecure at some level? What if something changes - in our relationships, in our roles, in how people value the things we do or have done? And what about those people who haven't measured up on our scale of value? We can feel sorry for them, pity them, or else, we disdain and judge them for their failures. But what if we look in the mirror one day and see ourselves as one of "those people" we felt sorry for or judged as not measuring up? What then?

Well, however it works out for us personally, there will always be winners and losers in society and the winners have to keep up a certain level of accomplishment, connections and success to keep their place in the social scale of value and worth. We may think

we're fine now, but we can lose a part of it or all of it if things change in our lives. We're all really vulnerable if society is our standard of value and worth.

Ok, preacher, you've made your point. But is there another foundation, a more solid, profound and stable one to base our value and worth as human beings? Is it inevitable that we must be vulnerable to the opinion of others and society's measure, or is there a genuine alternative? As Christians, as followers of Christ, we must answer yes, absolutely, there is an alternative, a different foundation for our value and worth as human beings. What is it? Let's ponder our readings in search of revelatory guidance.

The first reading narrates an encounter Jesus has with two sisters: Mary and Martha. I know that some of you may have a hard time with this story, and perhaps especially women with households. On the surface, it seems that Jesus' rebuke of Martha is harsh and unfair, especially given all the work she has to do to host Jesus and the disciples. Mary should be helping her older sister not letting her do all the work on her own. Isn't this a pattern we are all familiar with in families? Who does most of the work in your household? Too often it is the mothers and women of the house. Wouldn't they like to sit down and have the leisure to participate more attentively in conversation. But for that to happen, someone has to be cooking, serving and then clearing things out of the way.

But you know, this is one of those cases where we read our experiences into other situations and miss something different that may be going on. In Jesus' world even more so than our own, people were divided in their roles. Men and women were divided, old and young were divided, different races and cultures were divided, those who were morally upright were divided from those who were judged moral failures. Those who were wealthy were divided from those who were desperately poor. And even though those on top argued that everyone had to have their place and there had to be order otherwise there would be chaos, the real issue was power and control. Unless everyone accepted their prescribed role in society, power and control could be lost. Unless people felt threatened, they would not accept their prescribed place in society and where they fit on the social and moral scale of value and worth.

There was a specific value you held as a woman – you bore children to your husband and for the good of society, you raised the children, managed the household, and served. Your place was not to sit at the feet of teachers, interact, discuss, reflect and dialogue about spiritual, intellectual and political matters. That was the place of the men.

By rebuking her sister Mary, Martha was speaking for the maintenance of this system of order and hierarchy of power and control. It wasn't supposed to be Mary's place to sit

at Jesus' feet with the other male disciples. But Jesus had another view. Jesus saw the value and worth of Mary and Martha much differently. They were human beings with minds and hearts, created to interact, learn and grow like any other human being. Gender was irrelevant. If this meant the food was going to be served late or cold, so be it. First things first. Perhaps the men could also be part of the preparation and serving. Value and worth have nothing to do with fitting into some pre-determined or prescribed role. Value and worth are established in relationship to God and God alone. What does this mean?

Before we get to that, let's go to our second reading. Here we get confirmation that Jesus has no issue with serving. In fact, here he holds up serving as the most important job of all. In the hierarchy of the social world at that time, important people are not the ones doing the serving but the ones being served. Is it any different today? No it's not. The person with enough money and status is the person with personal servants, chauffeurs, maids, and people who do everything for them. That's how everybody knows how important and valuable they are. But Jesus turns this worldly thinking on its head. A leader in God's kingdom is a servant, and a true servant is ready to serve anyone from the least to the greatest exactly the same because each person is a child of God created for communion with God and fellowship with other living beings. There is no status in God's kingdom. There is no gender distinction in God's kingdom. There is no skin colour or culture or education or IQ testing in God's kingdom. There is no hierarchy in God's kingdom.

How do you identify the leaders? Look for those who are doing the serving. They're the ones leading everybody else by serving on their hands and knees if necessary. Serving is not demeaning work and it's not for specific people to do only. Serving is something we should all do beginning with the greatest down to the least. We should be ready to serve as much as being open to being served. And the way we are open to being served is by expressing gratitude. It's not an entitlement to be served but a gift. We say thank you because we mean it. We don't take it for granted.

And now we are ready for the last reading and the answer to the deeper question we've been asking. What is the gospel foundation for our value and worth if we reject the world's measure of it? If it's not about external things like who is serving or being served, what we have, what we can do or how people think of us and treat us that tells us and others how great we are, what is it then?

Our reading from the prophet Jeremiah gives us a biblical foundation. The prophet speaks God's words to a people demoralized. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt. They were freed from slavery and made a journey to freedom. The 10 commandments were

the basis of a moral foundation, a covenant between the people and God signed and sealed by the peoples' vows to be faithful. They were no longer slaves. Anything they did had to be their choice. A covenant is an agreement between two parties freely chosen.

But what happened over time? They became slaves again. But slaves in a vastly different way. They created a society of domination among themselves. Some were greater than others and some had authority over others. Men told women what they could and couldn't do. Young people couldn't plan their lives and their futures by what they wanted but by what their elders told them they had to do. Priests told the people what they had to believe. Teachers told students what they had to think. Officials told people how they had to live. Even though they were 'free' they were now slaves. Their hearts weren't driven by love founded on mutual trust, care and service, but on mistrust fueled by who was better than who, who was greater than who, who had power and authority over whom and who mattered most.

The prophet's words speak God's vision of human value and worth having nothing to do with where a person fits in relation to other people around them. Rather, it's all about your relationship to God. When the first humans were created according to the book of Genesis, God created them in God's "image and likeness" we're told. What is this image and likeness? It is the capacity for relationship, for communion, for friendship. God created us humans, according to the bible, to have a relationship of love based on trust with our creator. Out of that primary relationship we are called to form relationships with our earth and all creatures. We are relational beings in our core, and to be in relationship is all about love.

So, what God is saying in Jeremiah is that God will no longer be communicated to people through the mediation of some order of authority and hierarchy in society, through a priest or a teacher or a man or an elder. No. God will re-establish the roots of creation through direct, un-mediated relationship with each person. Does it matter who the person is? Does it matter whether they are deserving or not, successful or not, male or female on a gender spectrum, gay or straight, black or white, older or younger, good or bad in society's eyes, gifted or talented or accomplished, or just mediocre and plain, and even maybe riddled with a lifetime of mistakes and missed opportunities? No. It doesn't matter. 'This is the covenant I will make... says the Lord: I will put my law within them and I will write it in their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'know the Lord', for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest... for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.'

The world may be unforgiving. The world may be a place where you feel you're not that important or valuable. Your experience may be such that you don't feel you have much worth compared to the people around you. But before God you are priceless. Before God you have infinite potential whether you make use of that potential or not. Before God you are worth investing in, and God wants to connect with you personally. There is truth and beauty in you. There is the divine image in you. You are made for relationships of love and trust. You are worthy of being loved without limit, no matter what you accomplish and no matter where you come from.

Now, the hard part is believing it. The hard part is living your life on the basis of this faith. The hard part is letting God be God in your life and recognizing God has planted the seed of truth, beauty and grace in you so that you grow, flourish and cultivate genuine relationships... Do you believe this?...

Let us pray... Dear God, give me faith, faith that you are the centre of my life and therefore I am a person of infinite worth, value and importance.... Give me hope, hope that you have awesome things to continue to accomplish in and through me whatever I've done or failed to do... Give me love, love to love myself as you see me... love to love others as you see them... love to love life as a service to you, trusting that the more I give the more I will receive, what money cannot buy, what any earthly accomplishments and praise cannot give.... Amen.