

WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR VALUE & WORTH?

Philippians 3: 4-9; Psalm 139: 1-18

Have you ever been humiliated? Have you ever been made to feel small, unimportant, bad, foolish, even useless? Have you ever failed or made the kind of mistake that's made you feel embarrassed, incompetent or ashamed? I'm sure we can all answer yes to these questions. We all want to be honoured, respected, valued, celebrated. It makes us feel good about ourselves. We all fear being dishonoured, disrespected, dismissed, humiliated. We are all vulnerable to what others think at some level, how they see us, how they value us, whether they respect us. How we're treated makes all the difference in how we see ourselves and our value and worth. We'd like to be more independent when it comes to how we see ourselves. But even those of us with the greatest confidence and sense of value and worth in ourselves are still vulnerable to the opinion of others, especially others that matter to us or carry some influence.

But let's dig a little deeper into our vulnerability. The myth of the modern western world is that we can build our individuality to such an extent, that we can become independent and self-sufficient to such a degree, that the opinion of others will have little or no effect on us. And yet, we all know if we are honest, that there is a limit to what any human being can take. Expose us to enough social rejection, contempt and mistreatment, and we will internalize it all in destructive ways. We are 'porous' selves as human beings. We are affected by the environments around us in terms of how we see and value ourselves.

To draw this out a little more, let me tell a few stories. In the 1920s and 30s, companies in Europe were building factories in cities and drawing people from the countryside looking for work. The allure of working and living in the big city was attractive. But factory work was mindless and brutal in many ways. A young French activist named Simone Weil wanted to understand what it was like for workers on the factory floor. She got a job and started working at a car company. Within months, however, something terrible began to happen to her. She worked on an assembly line, and the foremen, under pressure from the owners, wanted to ensure that parts were being produced as efficiently and quickly as possible. Workers were rewarded if they produced a certain amount, but conversely, they were punished if they didn't achieve their targets. The punishment was not only a threat of demotion or even getting fired. Rather, it was a constant barrage of screams and insults. For some workers it was non-stop. It was degrading and humiliating being insulted so publicly day in and day out. Simone suffered such degrading insults daily. But the thing was, she got used to it - working all day, taking the abuse, leaving exhausted, getting all the sleep she

could get, just to undergo the same thing the next day. What she didn't realize was the damaging effect it was having on her sense of self.

This was especially revealed to her one afternoon. She happened to have the afternoon off. Exhausted, she hopped onto a street car. She was looking for the right change and apologizing to the driver. But the way he looked at her and smiled, and the few kind words he spoke... it was too much. Simone broke down. She started crying. She had to sit down because she felt dizzy. It had been months since she had felt any kindness from anyone. She hadn't realized how much she had changed. The fact that someone could treat her as a human being was shocking to her. Wow! She hadn't realized how being treated like dirt eventually made you feel like dirt, unworthy of dignity and respect. Thankfully, she could quit her job and write about her experience. What about other workers though?

Here's another story, one told by the famous playwright George Bernard Shaw. The story is of a man who works in a company with a boss who is demanding and relentless. The man needs the job and the income. He has a wife, a young son and another child on the way. But day in and day out he takes abuse. His boss insults him and pokes him with his finger telling him he's stupid and useless. He would fire him if he wasn't so nice. So, what happens? The man comes home exhausted, frustrated and wound up. Only, instead of how Weil experienced her humiliation by internalizing it as shame and worthlessness, this man externalizes his humiliation with anger. He abuses his wife verbally and physically. He yells at his son incessantly. He hates himself for it, but he can't help it. He can't tell his boss off. He can't risk losing his job. So those closest to him get it. And what happens as a result? The man's wife looks at herself in the mirror every morning after her husband is gone to work. She internalizes her husband's abuse. She tells herself she's ugly, stupid, useless. The man's son goes to school. He starts picking fights with other boys passing on the abuse physically and ending up in trouble. The school principle calls his parents in. So, what do you think happens next? More screaming at the boy and now hitting too. The cycle of humiliation and abuse keeps growing and spiralling like a contagious disease. What will happen to the boy as he grows up? Violence? Prison? Suicide?

We are all vulnerable to humiliation. We are all vulnerable in how we see and value ourselves and how others see and value us. Even for those of us who feel well-loved and respected most of the time, the vulnerability is right there below the surface. We live in a world where status, success, popularity and respect are everything. How we're treated every day and how we're valued for who we are and what we do can make or break us. But is there a better way? Is there a better source for getting our value and worth where we don't have to deny our imperfections, limitations or vulnerability, and yet not feel so vulnerable to the abuse of the world around us?

Let us ponder our scripture readings in search of revelatory wisdom. In our first reading, Paul the apostle speaks about his own journey. He tells of a time before he became a follower of Jesus. He had reached the pinnacle of success. He based his value and worth on his racial heritage as a faithful Jew. He was highly educated as a Pharisee. He was developing a reputation as a defender of his faith, taking on heretics of the faith like these new followers of Jesus. And he was great at it. He was loved, appreciated, valued and celebrated. He internalized all this and felt super confident in himself.

But then, something happened. The very heresy he was trying to stamp out among his people, spoke to his heart. His worth had been based on status, race, education, religious zeal and the praise of those around him he respected most. But he came to see all this as fake. Something much more powerful about this Jesus got to him. What was it?... It was love. To have faith in Christ is to open your heart to his love. If you let it, such love will work inside you and transform you bit by bit. Whatever happens on the outside, your sense of self will build up inside on a new foundation of worth. Jesus reveals and embodies that God loves you for who you are, not what you do. God loves you because you are, not because you become a somebody. God loves you even if you mess up and fail, not because you're better than others who mess up and fail. God loves you for who you can yet become, even if you still have a long way to go. Paul came up with a special word to express all this: Grace. Grace means gift and grace means love. A gift is unearned, undeserved, free, from the heart. Grace is the gift of love from God's heart. To believe God loves you, to really believe this in a way that it grows warm inside you, to trust it, to feel it, to internalize it even against a world that will tell you otherwise all too often, such faith is a gift.

And so, Paul says: "Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness of God based on faith." Think of your righteousness as your value and worth. So where do you get your righteousness – your value and worth? Is it based on the law – on what you achieve and accomplish and how the people that count value that? Or, do you get your value and worth through faith in God's love for you as a gift as Christ has revealed and embodied it? Paul goes through a big shift in his life: from basing his value and worth on what he has achieved and how important people value the worth of that, to finding his value and worth through the love of God in Jesus filling him up inside.

And Paul's experience is also that of the Psalmist in our second reading. Psalm 139 is a favourite Psalm for many. Why? It's very personal. But personal how? "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted

with all my ways... For it is you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works..." OK. I am known inside out. That means I am known with all my flaws, mistakes, struggles, regrets and resentments... And yet, I have also found peace and joy because God delights in me even though God knows me inside out, secrets and all! I'm am totally known inside out and loved inside out... Imagine living with such a faith... I don't have to be somebody to be loved. My value and worth is not in what I achieve or accomplish better than someone else. I don't have to be the focus of everyone else's attention and praise. My value and worth is infinite and no one and nothing in the world can take it away... Isn't that a powerful faith!

We live in a world where we're told to believe in ourselves and to love ourselves. But we are so vulnerable to the opinion of others that we end up being totally vulnerable to praise or blame, honour or shame... Imagine having a far more transcendent foundation for our value and worth: in the creator of the universe and the creator of me... Imagine if I see this creator as love incarnate, whom we Christians call Christ. Imagine, like the apostle Paul, not caring if all the recognition, popularity and praise of the world were taken away because it's all a façade that doesn't get to the genuineness of my heart where I need to feel my value and worth. Imagine my heart inhabited by the Spirit of this Christ flooding me with love even though I am flawed and broken because I am loved even in my imperfection and brokenness. It is love that will motivate me to become better, not fear of what others think or how they will evaluate my value and worth. I am free to be, and I am motivated to love because I feel the love inside... Isn't this a beautiful vision for building up my sense of self?

Let us pray: Fill us, O God, with your grace... give us new confidence in our infinite beauty because that's how you see us... Give us faith in our value and worth not because of what we do but because you have created us in all the particularity of who we are, broken yet precious, flawed and imperfect, yet wondrous in your eyes, full of potential till we breathe our last, on a journey of becoming... Amen.