

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Seeing through God's Eyes
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December 5, 2021

1 Samuel 1:9-20; Luke 1:26-38

Over the years there is a conversation that has come up in a few different settings. I have had this conversation in seminary, with friends who are not church attenders, in this church, and over coffee with colleagues. The conversation is about what the church has that no other organization does. Why church?

I'm sure everyone had something pop into their mind when I asked that question. Quick sidenote, I want to clarify that I will use the word "church" because it's a concept we understand here, but you could replace the word "church" with any other faith tradition's equivalent word and this will also be true of their worshipping community.

Okay, back to what popped into your mind as your answer to "Why church?" Maybe you thought about the community, the worship, the mission. There are endless reasons why someone chooses to include church in their life - all good and valid reasons. But what is truly unique about the church experience?

We build community around lots of things: sports teams, common interests, our favorite coffee shop. Community is not unique to church. Worship isn't unique to us either. Concerts can evoke the same worshipful energy. Even a walk on the beach can be worshipful. We don't need a church to worship. Mission - we can volunteer on our own. These are all great things that a church can do but they aren't only found in church.

When I have this conversation, we are trying to dig down to the essential gem that will help us understand who we are and why we are unique. If we know who we are and what we have to offer we become better salespeople. What is the thing that we have that no one else has that would inspire people to choose us? What is it that we have that people need?

As I have had this conversation over and over, I have learned to look past all the things that people can find somewhere else. There is something I believe shows itself as a unique church exclusive gem. Something that can not be found anywhere else. No podcast, social club, volunteer work, nowhere else can you find this thing. It only exists in a faith community.

It is so unique that its absence is one of the main reasons I believe the church in the United States is in decline. I do not see every church tapping into this powerful gem and by ignoring it they are diminishing their appeal and impact. I wholeheartedly believe that if Christians can refocus on this unique gem, we will get the revival for which so many have prayed.

The gem is...Worth. A steady reminder that we are worthy.

Not worthy because of the job we hold or the stuff we have. Not worth based on looks or humor, or how kind we are (even the jerks have worth). Out in the world our sense of worth is based on all kinds of distorted ideas. Where you were born, your gender, how smart your phone is, where you went to school, how many followers you have, how many likes you got on your last post. Out there, worth can plummet in a matter of seconds.

Here your worth is always the same because it is set by God. Here we remind one another to look through God's eyes. We are God's eyes for one another. The worst week can happen out there. Your worth can be zero in the eyes of the world, but here you are fully worthy.

The two women in our scripture passages today are up against their culture's idea of a woman's worth. Both of them live in worlds that have downgraded their worth. Hannah because she cannot get pregnant, and Mary because she will be pregnant before marriage. Both women face the harsh reality that a woman's worth in their world is narrow and fragile.

Hannah has struggled with her worth for years. Her culture says her worth is dependent on her ability to have children, and more importantly, male children. Her husband's other wife has given him many children. Hannah feels the heavy weight that she has not been able to fulfill her worth in the eyes of her culture. It really is only her culture that is telling her that she doesn't have worth, because her husband loves her very much. He tries to show her she has worth in how he treats her, even giving her twice what he gives to the rest of the family. Hannah is still upset and struggling to see her worth.

One day she is so distraught, she feels so worthless, that she goes to the temple and prays for God to send her a child. She promises that this child will serve the Lord and that she will raise this child to be a man of God. She hopes these promises will catch God's attention in some way so God will finally grant her prayer. Her self-worth has plummeted so low that she can't even bring herself to truly put voice to the words she's praying. She is terrified that someone will overhear her prayer and know that she is barren and judge her all over again. So she prays in silence, only moving her lips. Her feeling of worthlessness has silenced her.

A faith leader sees her praying, but Eli does not remember the gem that faith communities possess. He does not go over and remind her she is worthy in God's eyes. NO, he does what the rest of the world has already done to Hannah. He makes assumptions about her and judges her. Accusing her of being drunk and Eli brings her self-worth even lower.

In her state of feeling worthless, she pleads with Eli and says, "Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman." Worthless is not just how Hannah feels, it is her whole reality. Worthless is now a word she uses to describe herself to others. Eli immediately realizes his mistake and he says to Hannah, "Go in Peace."

Upon this declaration, we see a shift in Hannah. Scripture says her countenance was no longer sad from that point on. That is because to Hannah and her culture Peace was not just the absence of conflict. It was a blessing for wholeness. A reminder of her worth as a bearer of God's image. When Eli says, "Go in Peace," Hannah suddenly sees herself through God's eyes. She is worthy of peace, worthy enough for wholeness, worthy enough just as she is.

Of course, the angel Gabriel does things a bit better than Eli. I want you to notice the difference in results when worth is declared first and not judgment. Gabriel goes to Mary and the first thing they say is "You are favored." In their opening line Gabriel makes sure that Mary knows she is worthy. That sets up success for the rest of the conversation. When Gabriel then tells Mary that she's about to get pregnant, something that would have stripped her of worth in the eyes of society, her family, her friends, and her fiancé. When Gabriel says this terrible thing is about to happen to you, Mary says, "okay." She is able to give this response because she is already assured of her worth. This pregnancy-thing is not normally good news for unwed women, but if God says she is worthy, she is willing to serve in this way.

Telling people that at their basic level of existence God has declared them worthy is the thing faith communities do on a regular basis that is not found anywhere else in the world. Every week we can come here with whatever happened to us, whatever we did during that week, we can be reminded that it does not take an ounce away from our worth in God's eyes. When we get that weekly reminder that we have worth, it places us on solid ground, like it did for Mary. And we are then able to share the gem with someone else, and let them know that they are also worthy and valid.

It's not a coincidence that we pass the peace when we gather. It is an ancient practice of people with faith to remind each other that they deserve peace, they are worthy of wholeness. When we gather here, we remember that God

declares peace to us, we declare it to each other, and then we go declare it to the world. Our failure to do this, I truly believe, is why the church is in decline. We are not doing a good job of telling people that they are worthy. We are not sharing peace and wholeness.

Feeling worthless is dangerous. Our world is experiencing a pandemic from covid but our country is also experiencing a pandemic in our mental health. For far too long we have forced people with mental illnesses and mental injuries into the posture of Hannah where they can't even speak about what is troubling them because they will be judged. There is so much stigma around seeing a therapist or taking medicine so your brain can be chemically balanced. We would never tell someone with diabetes that they should just try harder to produce insulin, or they just need to choose to produce insulin. Yet we tell people who are depressed they should just try harder, that they should choose to be happy. All those judgments and tiny comments rip at a person's worth until they get to a point where they figure, I'm already worthless, what else can I provide this world?

Feeling worthless is not just dangerous to the person who is feeling that way, it's dangerous to all of us around them too. This week a child who felt worthless thought that the only way to regain his worth would be to bring a gun to school and shoot his teachers and fellow students. He had lost his worth and thought he could force people to see him if he acted in a violent way. When we feel like we are worthless, we grasp at anything that will make us feel in control of something again. If we have the power to control something, then we can't be completely worthless.

Now I have tried every flip and stretch and bend to try to make sense of what happened in Oxford High School and there really is no sense to be found. But I wonder...I wonder if someone had declared some worth into that child's life, or if someone had reminded him weekly that he is, at his essence, worthy... I just wonder.

So much in our world is designed to strip us of our worth. We are taught that WE have to grow a thick skin. We are told we need to laugh in the face of bullies. There are college courses about becoming more resilient, and self-help books are a billion-dollar industry. Essentially, everyone is looking to develop the response that Mary had to Gabriel's news. They want to be able to roll with the punches and confidently walk through life, sure of their worthiness. What actually gave Mary the ability to do those things was her assurance that she was favored by God. She was told first she was worthy. Her worth wasn't dependent on her response; she had worth no matter what. No one wants to be Hannah at the beginning of the story. Everyone wants to be Hannah at the end. Well, what got her there was the declaration of peace, shalom, wholeness, worthiness. Being reminded of her worth made all the difference in her life.

This is what we need to do more of. We need to see our worthiness reflected back to us, and for us to reflect worthiness on to others. We need to make sure that every child, every person, knows that they are worthy. I truly believe the world would be a completely different place if everyone was assured of their worth on a regular basis.

I know this tragedy in Oxford has left a lot of us feeling helpless. Our worth has been damaged by this nightmare in our community. For a long time, I had no idea how I was going to talk about peace after this week. Then I realized peace is exactly what I can do in this situation. I can make sure that more people feel God's peace. I can live in a way that reminds people they are worthy of wholeness, that they deserve shalom. That gem that is uniquely experienced in places of faith, like this church, is what the world needs. People need to know their worth in God's eyes is a worth that can never be taken from them or diminished.

Peace is what we light the candle for today, It is the word we walk with this week. The peace that comes from seeing ourselves through God's eyes and being sure of our worth.