

Epiphany 4A17, January 29, 2017, I Cor. 1:18-31, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

As many of you know my family is undergoing a process of downsizing. After my father's death last month it was decided that it's time to close up the house my parents lived in at Homestead Village. My mother is now living in the skilled care unit at Homestead and can't accommodate the possessions that were in the house. So my brother and two sisters and our families have been going through the house, deciding what to keep, what to give away, and what to throw out. Fortunately my parents moved several times throughout their lives so the accumulation wasn't that great. There are a few items we took to my mother's room, others we divided among ourselves, and others donated to the Homestead Tag Sale that benefits people who need assistance for their care. We'd pick up an item, say a painting or a lamp, and ask "who wants this?" or "what do you think this is worth?" On more than one occasion someone would say, "I wonder how this would be appraised on Antiques Roadshow?"

We live in a world where everything has a value, and everything has a price. Sometimes value and price match, and sometime they don't. There are lots of people who bring in something to be appraised on the Roadshow and are given a price, but will say, "but I'll never sell it. This goblet belonged to my great grandmother who brought it with her from Romania."

But what of those items which aren't physical? How do you value something that's not tangible? Take education, for example. What is the value of an education today? Every community puts a price on education. In Lancaster it's about \$17,000 per child, per year. Over a 13 year public school educational journey, the price of that student's education will be over \$220,000. That's the cost, but is that the value? How do we measure value? Do we look at just the cost? What would the cost to the community be if we didn't educate that child? Is the community getting its money's worth in paying for education? These are the questions debated in any community, in every state and in our country as a whole.

What do you value in your life? What things would you be willing to part with if someone came and offered you a price? What would you not be willing to sell in a million years? What could you not imagine ever doing without? Your home? That precious piece of jewelry given to you by a grandparent? Your pension? Your savings account?

The fact is we all have something; some possession, some value, some necessary and precious way of engaging the world that we consider so very important and even indispensable. Yet in a crunch those things we think of as indispensable suddenly lose their importance. Fred Craddock, a well-known preacher, tells a story of a missionary family in China in the 1940's. The communists had taken over and were expelling all the western Christian missionaries. They were told they had to leave the country and they could take 200 pounds of items with them. The debates in the family began between husband and wife and their two small children. "We have to take that vase. But this typewriter is brand new. What about my books?" Items went on the scale and off the scale, until finally they had 200 pounds exactly, not an ounce under or over. The officers came and asked, "did you weigh the children?" Suddenly items that seemed too precious, so necessary, are thrown on the trash. Who wouldn't sacrifice everything for their children? Who wouldn't be willing to leave the world's treasures behind? Such is the fate today of millions of refugees fleeing their homelands leaving precious possessions behind in order to seek shelter and safety for themselves and their children. Today over 51% of all refugees are children.

So what are the intangibles that you value? Maybe yours is a belief in your own ability to meet whatever life throws at you; a resiliency and cleverness that always rises to any challenge. Or it could be a faith in your own goodness; the belief that always doing good for others will help see you through any difficult times that may come your way. Maybe you are a good planner for the future, saving enough, making plans far enough in advance, anticipating unforeseen circumstances and blunting the inevitable challenges of an unknown future. These are the things, the attitudes and ideas you can never see yourself doing without. They are priceless.

But what if I told you all these things we think are priceless; all that we think we can never do without, aren't worth anything? What if you heard you can't shelter yourself from everything the future might bring you? What if I told you your own goodness, your attempts at always keeping to the moral high ground aren't going to save you from events that are yet to be? What would you do if your own cleverness gives out, your ability to rise to a challenge gives way to defeat, and your resiliency hardens until you break?

You just might say, "get me out of here. This is depressing. I need success. I need encouragement. I need to feel like I'm on the right track. I know I'm not perfect, but I want to know I'm at least going in the right direction. I want to know I have some power, some say in the way things turn out, that my cooperation and my effort are not going to go un-noticed."

Except, this is not the way of the cross. The cross of Jesus takes everything we know about the world and turns it upside down and inside out. You think strength and power will get you out of a jam? Jesus cast out demons and healed the sick, and they put him on trial and nailed him to a cross. You believe your moral goodness will save you? Jesus is perfectly sinless, and he suffers at the hands of those whose morals are impeccable. Are you clever? Are you smart? Jesus is the Son of God and he got ground up in the most ruthless political and military machine ever devised.

God chose the way of the worthless in order to bring to shame all that we consider priceless. God takes what we value, what we believe we could never live without and turns it on its head. There is no place to hide, no amount of money or cleverness or planning for the future or accumulated wealth for a rainy day that will rescue us or save us from an unknown future.

But God chose a different way, a way which meets that future for us and with us. In our weakness, in our failures to anticipate and protect ourselves God is there, at the cross, vulnerable and weak and broken. Christ gathers in all our fears that the world is passing us by, our struggles with our bodies which grow older, our disappointments with our own abilities to be clever and smart. The cross takes in all of this weakness, what we consider worthless, in order to show the world what is truly priceless. What could never be bought. What could never be held onto no matter what someone might offer you.

St. Paul wrote the Corinthian church: Jews demand signs, Greeks desire wisdom. To that we might add: Americans demand value. But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, foolishness to Gentiles and worthlessness to Americans. For God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God chose what is worthless in the world in order to shame that which we think is priceless. God chose what is low and despised and worthless, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." Amen.