

Message: "Appreciating our Gifted Majesty" - 5-31-26 (Trinity Sunday)

Scripture: Psalm 8

¹O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

²Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

⁴what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

⁵Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

⁶You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,

⁷all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

⁸the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

⁹O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Sometimes, I must admit, I find it hard to be humble. I mean, when you've had such grand experiences as I have, and rubbed elbows with such famous and powerful figures as I have, and been the confidant of such notable and respected individuals as I have, it's hard to not toot one's horn a bit. Take, for example, my long list of notable connections and personal encounters with persons and institutions of note which I will conveniently list for you now:

1. I have been an employee of Yale University - where I was employed as a dishwasher cleaning pots and pans in the cafeteria basement during my final year.
2. I have been an employee of our country's National Center for Atmospheric Research (the institution recently threatened with closure by our present national administration) - where I was a temporarily-employed janitor for a whole two months.
3. I have met and conversed with Robin Williams, Huey Lewis, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Todd Rundgren, Tracey Chapman, Bruce Cockburn, and Niel Diamond (OK, granted, the conversations were decidedly one way, with me saying something in the direction of the stage or podium a thousand feet away along with thousands of others in the audience while the individual was speaking, singing, or performing - but still I was there, at least in the same room or auditorium as they were!).
4. And, I once had a direct, face-to-face interaction with the president of Yale University, Benno Schmidt, back in 1991 - when I inadvertently opened the door he was coming out of at Beineke Library on the University Campus - only recognizing who he was when my roommate exclaimed after he had gone out of earshot "do you know who that was?"

Yes, I've rubbed elbows with a host of famous, powerful, influential people and institutions - but the elbows that were rubbed were barely so; my interactions with all of these entities were so inconsequential as to not have had any substantial effect upon my life at all, save for the sermon illustration to which you are now subjected. Those interactions certainly bestowed none of the power, grace, or importance of those figures upon myself; I had to look elsewhere for my value as a human being.

That's what God offers, you see. A sense of our own value separate from the world; a sense of our own importance aside from any earthly measure; a sense of our significance that does not rely upon our performance, eloquence, accomplishments, connections, or any other capacity we may or may not possess in and of ourselves.

God, and God alone, conveys our sacredness. God and God alone gifts us our existential importance. God and God alone decrees to us the value and sacredness and importance of each other and holds both the hope and expectation that we will see each other in the same way.

This is the point of Psalm 8 which contains some of the most eloquent words of scripture outlining the sacredness God has conferred upon creation: ³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; ⁴what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? ⁵Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. ⁶You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet."

It's a pretty humbling statement the Psalmist is making: we are nothing, and yet we are everything, because God says so. We are so very far from God, so very far from perfection or understanding or wisdom, yet nonetheless God draws near to us, conferring upon us a sense of who we are that we completely miss if we look to our world or ourselves alone. And God helps us understand and receive this condition of sacredness, to live into it with grace and power and beauty and love. But it is God's grace we live into, it is God's power we employ, it is God's beauty we enjoy, it is God's love we employ with each other. Keeping this in sight is the secret of life - the source of all creation's value is endowed by its creator. Period.

It's a secret the world longs to understand let alone embrace, as we can see by our present day, all-too-common efforts at self-elevation. Does any particular example stand out these days, I wonder? (progress through slides slowly with

pastor comment?) Our president provides one of the most obvious examples of chasing after significance, turning to money or power or material or even outright idolatry to make his significance apparent; but there are so very many other notable examples of individuals trying to substantiate their importance. There's a desperation at work in the lives of many people to demonstrate their importance in the eyes of the world which, ironically, does nothing but expose their insecurity; it is painfully obvious that they exist in a world where their self-importance is constantly under threat. It is a well-known mark of insecurity that the volume of personal uplift increases as a person's sense of self-worth decreases; bragging is the epitome of trying to rise above one's fears of meaninglessness or hope. In the immortal words of one of my favorite musical theologians named Jackson Browne, from his song entitled "Your Bright Baby Blues," there's a perfect line that describes this folly:

I've been up and down this highway
far as my eyes can see
No matter how fast I run
I can never seem to get away from me
No matter where I am
I can't help thinkin' I'm just a day away
From where I wanna be
Now I'm runnin' home, babe
Like a river to the sea "

"No matter how fast I run, I can never seem to get away from me." What a powerful line - its power is in its accuracy for so many lives trying to run away from themselves - and discovering its absolute futility.

Of course, such efforts eventually fail, and fail miserably; they always do. Scandal, deceit, corruption, stupidity, irrationality, delusions, and other self-destructive tendencies all become normalized in the lives of those who flagrantly try to prove their own importance in a competitive and dubious world - and there will be consequences; there will come a time when they will face the folly of their efforts. It may not be in this life, but to some degree it likely will be in this life, and likely already has begun, for one can only run so far away from oneself before one realizes one is stuck with oneself.

We are nothing in and of ourselves - but we are everything to God. This is the main paradox that drives our faith understanding - the impossibility that we matter, and God's decree that we matter absolutely; it is a conferred importance

the world cannot give nor erase, an implicit significance each of us embodies simply because God says so - and perish the soul that does not recognize that God has the last word on this! The greatest condemnation is for those who condemn what God affirms - and humanity is at its worst when it condemns what God proclaims precious. The cross is a paramount example, but so are the multitude of ways we devalue others these days - when we vilify immigrants, we condemn what God affirms; when we send missiles to kill, we destroy what is precious to God; when we slander or insult, we injure whom God loves; when we proclaim anyone lesser, we devalue what God has made invaluable.

In a sense, the whole of Jesus' ministry on earth was simply raising the issue of our value in God's eyes. It is something we struggle with all the time, spending so much effort trying to determine who's more important, who's in the right group, who believes the right things or lives the right lifestyle. We especially do this with God, trying to squeeze out clarity in God's preferences for the details of our lives. Jesus starts from the other side of things, with God's initial and fundamental declaration of life's preciousness regardless of details we experience. The question of Jesus was never "do you believe the right things about God?;" the question of Jesus was always "do you know how much God loves you?" proceeding to demonstrate this truth in all the ways he could. Do we know how much God loves us? Each one of us? Personally, completely, without condition, without end?

Jesus came to the world to help us know God - and the first thing Jesus proclaimed is that God knows us. Jesus made it personal: God knows me. And God decided I'm worth loving; God decided the same thing about you. There is no need to bother about the world's assessment of the value of our lives; God's verdict overrules any other. It is a verdict meant to apply to any life we come across - here before us is someone infinitely important to God. May we understand this about ourselves; may we understand this about each other; for God won't have it any other way.