

The other week I had the privilege to have a phone call with the director of a state-wide choir that I was a member of when I was in high school. Charles Snyder is his name, but to this day I still call him Mister Snyder. Not only is he thoroughly gifted musically, he is also one of those souls who lifts up others around him. For instance, I credit Mister Snyder as the person who set me on the path to become a pastor. By the time of our recent conversation, the pandemic had brought his musical work to a near standstill, and the whole situation was weighing on him.

There is of course the common emotional toll of the pandemic. But think for a moment of musicians like Mister Snyder, whose music has always been a primary means to bring a message of hope, grace, and goodwill to others. What can be done when gathering an audience, let alone a choir, is suddenly a threat to public health? We pondered this together, and then I recounted a story that I had heard Mister Snyder share once over twenty years ago. A former choir member had contacted him about an experience he had gone through. This young man had fallen on hard times, and he found himself one evening in a bathtub with a razor blade. This young man was about to make use of that blade when a song that he had once sang in Mister Snyder's choir came to mind. The song is called "Be Not Afraid," and it is based on Isaiah 43. The lyrics say,

*Be not afraid, for I have redeemed you.
Be not afraid, I have called you by name.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.
When you pass through the floods, they will not o'erwhelm you.*

When you walk through the fire, you will not be consumed.

You are mine. You are precious in my sight.

Mister Snyder recalled telling the story, and he was able to share the man's name. That man is doing well today. Mister Snyder and I then fondly discussed how the gift of song continues on, even if for this time it reverberates in our hearts and not in concert halls. I can't speak for him, but my heart was renewed by the conversation and the stories that Mister Snyder and I shared.

These last several weeks have weighed on us all, and certainly on some people more than others. The song Be Not Afraid has been in my head a lot during these weeks, and that final line: "You are mine. You are precious in my sight." That message should give peace of mind to us all: after God's declaration that we will not be abandoned during the worst of events, God then says, "You are mine. You are precious in my sight." A balm for weary souls to hear.

However, this past week I've tried finding balance between that verse and a verse that is tucked in our psalm today. Psalm 116 is beautiful and powerful, but I've always been put off by verse 15; "Precious in your sight, O LORD, is the death of your servants." How do I make sense of that? Is God gleeful when someone dies? Is this some morbid old theology that we should best avoid? Should these words even be spoken in the midst of a pandemic? I had to pray about it. And I had to study it.

To be honest, the most troubling thing about verse 15 is how it seems to be such a stark contrast from the rest of the psalm. The rest of the psalm is about how the psalmist had fallen ill, the grip of death was tightening, but God delivered the psalmist from death. Does it make sense for the psalmist to say that his death is "precious" in God's sight right after disclosing how horrible he thinks death is and

how thankful he is that God saved him from it? So perhaps my problem is that I've misunderstood the intent of the word "precious." At its root, precious means something is costly, expensive, and held dear.

"Precious in your sight, O LORD, is the death of your servants." This means that someone's death does not go unnoticed. Precious in God's sight means that God knows there is value in each life, and God doesn't view that life as one number out of many. It means that unlike us, God doesn't become numb to numbers like 53,000 deaths in this nation alone and 202,000 worldwide. Rather, God holds dear each of these deaths and weeps for them by their names. All of them were created in God's image. All of them died bearing God's image. Precious in your sight, O LORD, is the death of your servants. God does not take lightly any of these deaths.

That reminds me of a mystery that still baffles me: that God would honor us by letting us bear God's image. That's just grace; a gift that we don't deserve. Yet the mystery grows deeper when God willingly bore our human image, died in our image, and rose again in our image, so that we can be forever bound to God. The mystery to me is why God would go to such lengths. And -- to be honest -- the only conclusion I come to is this: God has a love for us that I will never completely grasp. All I can do is relent to it and allow that love to shape me.

An interesting aspect of the Road to Emmaus story is that no one has ever known where this Emmaus was located. The name means "warm spring," and a lot of ancient villages in Judea had that moniker. Another interesting aspect of this story is that we are told the identity of one of the disciples -- Cleopas -- but the other is left nameless. Where is Emmaus? Who is the second disciple? There is an old theory for why these questions exist, and that is because Christians are supposed to see

themselves as that second disciple. As that theory goes, you are supposed to see yourself walking with the resurrected Christ. You are the one whose heart is warmed when scripture is opened for you. You are the one welcoming the resurrected Christ into your home. Finally, you are the one who sups with the living Lord.

My heart broke when I first read this story recently, because the culminating point of the story is that when Jesus blessed, broke, and gave bread to the disciples, it was then that they realized this is indeed Jesus who had been with them this whole time. My heart broke because I long to commune with you. I long for the experience of us gathering together once again to break bread at the Lord's table.

My heart was broken, but where I am now is this: that day of breaking bread will come. Perhaps we are on the Road to Emmaus now more than ever in our lives. Christ is present, walking with us. We can still welcome Jesus into our homes. He can still warm our hearts by opening up scripture to us. Like those disciples on that road, we might not be sure what all is going on and where Jesus is in all this.

So perhaps this is the good news for us today: we can welcome Christ into our homes, and that is an invitation that Jesus will never refuse. Jesus is ecstatic to join us, because he loves you more than you can grasp. You are his, and you are precious in his sight. One day we will break bread together again, and perhaps then we will have a realization of how Christ has been walking with us all along.

Thanks be to God. Amen.