

John 15:13 Value the Gift

Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. (NIV84)

Dear Friends in Christ,

How do you know the value of something? If you're in business, you might say simply that something is worth whatever someone is willing to pay for it. If you're an economist, you might talk about how the law of supply and demand determines the cost of a particular good – but you'll probably also admit that value and cost aren't exactly the same thing.

The question of value gets trickier when we get to matters of taste, context, and personal opinion. A three-year-old's favorite teddy bear may be the most valuable thing in the world to him, even if someone else would be ready to toss it in the trash. And a billionaire might bid \$300 million dollars at auction for a painting that most of the rest of us wouldn't even pay \$300 for. ~~And I imagine that a Green Bay Packers jersey signed by Aaron Rodgers won't be worth half as much in Dallas, Phoenix, or Tampa Bay as it would in Wisconsin.~~

But all those are *things*. What about *people*? How do you know the value of a human being? What is a person's *life* worth?

Our first impulse might be to answer that in a general way, measuring other people, but what if it were your own life? Imagine yourself, in another time or another place, standing on the block at a slave auction, hearing various people in the crowd bidding to buy you, placing a value on your strength, talents, looks, and skills – on your body and life. Would you ever feel that their price was high enough to match what you feel you are worth?

Or imagine a situation that someone in our society is perhaps more likely to face in this day and age: You are diagnosed with a rare type of cancer, it's aggressive, and the doctor tells you that if it's not treated you'll probably be dead in about six months. The good news: there is a new treatment available that has had a 70% success rate against this type of cancer. The bad news: the treatment is extremely expensive – as much as \$600,000 for a three-month course of medicine. So how much is your life worth? It depends who's paying, right? If it's the government, they'll probably have a limit. If it's health insurance, they'll have a different figure. If you're paying out of pocket, your family – especially your heirs – might put a completely different value on your life. And who's to say any of them would see it the same way you do? This isn't just a mental exercise – there are real-life stories from places where assisted suicide is legal, and someone with advanced cancer has been told expensive treatments would not be covered, but suicide pills would be.

Now imagine one more situation: You are a brand-new human being, just a few weeks or months old, growing in your mother's womb. Your entire existence is about growing bigger, stronger, smarter, so that you can enter the world of air and light, to fulfill the many wonderful purposes God has in mind for you. But the mother whose arms you are made for and with whom you already have such a unique bond, is conflicted: On the one hand, there is your life, but on the other hand is her just-beginning-to-blossom career, which she's certain will be stalled or at least significantly sidetracked if she has a baby right now. How much will you end up being worth to her?

Now, of course, we are all naturally inclined to care more about our own lives and value them more highly than others'. But as Christians, we particularly appreciate that the worth we give ourselves should also be given to every other person, because every other person is a living, special, unique, creation of God just as we are. Actually, it's even more than that – in Philippians 2 Paul tells us, “...*in humility consider others better than yourselves.*”¹

But that still doesn't answer the fundamental question: What is any person's life worth? This gift – which is what life is, because it's not something any of us could ever make, earn, or purchase – this gift: how should it be valued?

The Bible gives us the answer. It tells us exactly the value God has placed on every life, but at the same time it tells us that it's a price far beyond dollars and cents, beyond measuring, beyond figuring out. We heard it just a few minutes ago in our reading from 1 John 3: “*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.*” Now, on the first level, that verse obviously is telling us something about love, but in doing that it also states something about how the Lord, in love, values us: for your life and my life and every sinner's life, Jesus gave his life.

That's hardly a one-for-one, like-for-like transaction. The life Jesus gave – and the death he died – was fully human, but in a class all alone, because he was not just a man but was the very Son of God, begotten by the Father from eternity, co-equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the Word of God incarnate, Lord of the Universe. This is one of the logic-defying, love-defining truths of the gospel that should blow our minds every day: not just that God chose to save us, instead of punishing us as we deserve, but that each one of us was worth so much that the Son of God submitted himself for our sake to unearned suffering and unimaginable pain, and then paid the ultimate, inconceivable price: he died – the righteous for the unrighteous, the all-powerful for the powerless, the eternal for the created, the immortal for the mortal.

We treasure this truth not just because it is so amazing and wonderful, but especially because this truth is *for us*. And we need it to be for us, because without it we would be lost and hopeless. We are sinners who sin – every one of us. From the moment we come into existence in our mothers' wombs, we bear the stain of sin, and from the time we meet the world sin becomes part of our daily, even hourly practice. As children we fail to value our parents as God's representatives and blessings to us, and so we disobey them. When we grow up and marry we fail to value our spouses as God's special gifts, and so we snipe and grow resentful, we criticize and quarrel, we cheat or flirt with unfaithfulness, and sometimes we just give up. In our callings as friends, neighbors, siblings, citizens, and whatever jobs we have, we fail to value the people God has placed in our lives for us to love and serve. Even as Christians, we too often fail to value God's name, God's gifts, and God's means of grace – the gospel in the Word and the Sacraments. I could list plenty of other sins that I am guilty of and that you are guilty of, but the point is clear: because we are disobedient and ungrateful rebels against our Creator and his will, what we deserve from him is not salvation but damnation; not heaven, but hell.

But despite this, the Father said, “No. I love them – each one and all of them. I will save them, so they can be with me forever.” So he made a plan, and sent his Son, and Jesus took on our sins and suffered for them and died for them on the cross, paying the price of our disobedience and ingratitude in full. He exchanged our guilt for his perfect holiness, so that now we are qualified for the life God created us for, and paradise awaits us. It makes no earthly sense, but heaven's considerations are higher than ours: Christ decided *you* were worth sacrificing his life for, and because of that you have been set free from sin and will live forever, as he does since his Easter morning resurrection.

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#) (Php 2:3). (1984). Zondervan.

So if God valued you enough to give you life, and even more than that valued you enough to give his Son for your salvation, then clearly your life has tremendous, amazing value. When Jesus told his disciples that there is no greater way to show your love for someone than to lay down your life for that someone, he was talking about the highest price anyone could ever pay. You could have only \$10 in your wallet or billions in your bank account, but either way the greatest gift of love you can give is your own life for your friend – or spouse, or child, or brother, or sister, or neighbor. Again, that doesn't just say something about love, it says something about the value of your life.

And so what should be true of all people will be especially true of Christians: we will recognize the value of our own lives, treasure that gift, and therefore take good care of it and treat it as something of immeasurable worth.

Now, it's not unusual to hear unbelievers speak of life as a gift to be appreciated or celebrated. You don't have to be a Christian to experience the joys of watching children grow, of love and laughter, of a summer breeze or a brilliant sunset, or the thrills of curiosity, discovery, and accomplishment. But there's a problem when people use those experiences to measure the value of their lives, because when age or illness, disability, or even depression keeps them from enjoying what they used to enjoy, they begin to think that their lives aren't worth much anymore. Then maybe come things like no longer taking good care of their health, or taking risks and acting carelessly. But it can also lead to big things like considering suicide and, more and more today, asking doctors or others to help you take your life. Let's be clear: de-valuing your life in any of those or other ways is sinful. It's not up to anyone but God to decide when your life should no longer be lived, and until that day and hour, we have the responsibility to be good stewards of the gift of life: to take good care of our physical and mental health as well as our spiritual needs. What that requires is going to be different for different people and at different times, but as God's dearly loved children, we will always value his precious gift of life.

And not just for ourselves. You might remember how Luther explains the Fifth Commandment in the Small Catechism: "We should fear and love God that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need." One might say that the bare minimum of loving our brothers and sisters and neighbors as Jesus has loved us is not causing them pain or endangering their life or health, but love is never about the minimum – so we will value the gift of life in and for those who cannot or will not do so themselves.

The Bible is full of encouragements and commands to take care of the vulnerable in society – widows and orphans being perhaps the most common example – but we are also told in Proverbs 31 to "*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,*"² and there are probably no people who fit that description better than the unborn. In God's eyes, and therefore also in our eyes, the life of a two-week-old fetus in the womb, the life of a two-minute-old embryo in a Petri dish, and the life of a squalling two-month-old baby have great value – not just "some" value but the same value as any other human being – because that's what they are: body and soul human beings, unique, living, and loved by God.

So as Christians we certainly cannot condone or participate in abortion. And embryos grown outside the womb must be respected and treated as the special and precious human beings they are, so we will reject scientific experimentation with them and reckless fertility treatments. "Speaking up" for those tiny people can take many forms, and in the coming months changes in American abortion law may give us new opportunities and obligations to speak, but

² [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#) (Pr 31:8). (1984). Zondervan.

the one thing we cannot do when we value the gift of life is sit silent and ignore the injustice and horror going on all around us.

Increasingly also we find ourselves needing to pay attention to things happening at the end of life as much as at the beginning. In the name of “compassion” – though often it’s more about finances or the preferences of family members – patients with terminal conditions are being “helped along” to death, often long before it’s clear God’s ready to take them. The elderly, severely ill, and handicapped are pressured to give up on living so that their dying can make life easier for others. And people with dementia are routinely treated as less than the human beings they are – as though their condition has lowered or even eroded entirely the value of their lives. And when or because any such people cannot speak for themselves, Christ’s disciples will speak up for them.

But talk can be, as they say, “cheap” and what caring believers are about is a lot more than just opposing abortion or euthanasia. When we value the gift of life and when we love our neighbor, we will act, and not only in small or unseen ways. If Jesus tells us that the kind of love we will aim for is the kind that lays down our lives for others, then things that are less and less final than dying for someone will be common practice for us, right? *[Note: reference to specific examples/opportunities for your congregation may be worthwhile with the following.]* For instance, instead of condemning a single mother for her life choices, we will help her to care for her child and be a good parent. Or instead of just feeling sorry for the disabled, we will try to give them the support and assistance they need. And instead of ignoring the elderly – especially those in poverty – we will find ways to honor and care for them. Every day we are given opportunities to show the love of Jesus by valuing others’ lives more highly than our own, and giving of ourselves as he gave himself for us, his friends.

In our first lesson today we read how God used a simple vine to teach Jonah a lesson about valuing life. The prophet claimed his own life wasn’t worth living – he said he’d rather die than live – but in fact he was only upset and uncomfortable, and when the vine grew up and gave him shade he was happy. The death of the vine made him angry – he was emotionally invested in its life – and God used that to make his point: the thousands and thousands of people in Nineveh that Jonah wanted to see destroyed because they were Israel’s enemies were souls that mattered to God – he was emotionally invested in their lives – and those lives should have mattered to his prophet, too.

You and I don’t need a vine and a scorching east wind to learn this lesson. We have the sacrifice and example of Jesus, who gave himself for us. The love of God which has given us life is our guide, power, and inspiration: whenever, wherever, and in whomever we encounter human life, our actions, attitudes, and words will show the wonder and the worth of it. Love as we have been loved; value the gift. Amen.

Alternate Annunciation Conclusion:

In our readings today we were reminded of both the miraculous wonder that was Christ’s conception and the merciful wonder that was his coming to do God’s will in our world. The Son of God became human like us, so that he could sacrifice himself to make sinners holy.

If all that had happened in our day and time it’s not hard to imagine some things being different. Mary’s friends and family – perhaps Joseph, too – may well have encouraged her to get an abortion, since being pregnant when she’s young, inexperienced, and engaged to someone else would certainly be difficult for her. And her baby, Jesus, when he

grew up, might have been told by well-meaning friends or disciples that it would be foolish to die for other people – that his life was obviously worth much more than theirs, and that he should think first of his own interests. On the other hand, many other people might end up agreeing with his enemies – that Christ’s existence would be inconvenient and uncomfortable for them, and that therefore his life would not be worth respecting or preserving. They might not shout “Crucify him!”, but they wouldn’t offer any resistance to the execution of an innocent, either.

We know better. Not just because we know the truth about human life at its beginning, middle, and end, but because we know the love of God and how it has given us life on earth and in heaven. It is our guide, power, and inspiration: whenever, wherever, and in whomever we encounter human life, our actions, attitudes, and words will show the wonder and the worth of it. Love as we have been loved; value the gift. Amen.