



July 1, 2018

We Look Up and Discover Our Dignity

Pastor Vern Christopherson

PSALM 8NRSV

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!

As many of you know, I grew up on the South Dakota prairie. I attended a one-room country school named Brule. We didn't have a lot of books in our library, but we did have the Lone Ranger series and the Nancy Drew mysteries. And of course, we had the *Little House on the Prairie* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Unlike the Lone Ranger and Nancy Drew, *Little House on the Prairie* felt like it was happening right next door. *The Long Winter* was our long winter. *On the Banks of Plum Creek* was like the banks of Brule Creek where I played as a boy. *Little House in the Big Woods* reminded me of the state park that was just over the hill. In many ways, those books defined my childhood. They were sweet and gentle and poignant.

Then again, there were harsher moments too, descriptions of life on the prairie that involved struggle and conflict. In a chapter entitled, "Going West," Wilder tells of a

pioneering family not unlike her own. Pa, the father, desired to go “where the wild animals lived without being afraid.” Where “the land was level and there were no trees.” Where – and I quote – “there were no people. Only Indians lived there.” If that comment wasn’t jarring enough, a little later in the book one of the characters says, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian.”

I don’t remember reading that last line when I was growing up, but it’s there in print. I do remember when the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation basketball teams came to play in the state tournament. They played with a run-and-gun style. I thought they were fun to watch, but a bit out of control. Who knows if my impressions were shaped by the stories of Laura Ingalls Wilder? Her words may have painted a picture for me of a people who were a little less civilized than white people.

Perhaps you’ve been following the latest news about Laura Ingalls Wilder. Her name is being removed from a prestigious children’s book award. It’s going from the “Laura Ingalls Wilder Award” to the “Children’s Literature Legacy Award.” This move hits close to home. As I see it, we can’t rewrite history, but we do need to be sensitive toward those who’ve been wounded by it. We don’t need to stop reading *Little House on the Prairie* to our children, but we do need to talk about these issues with them...and with each other. To be honest, most of us simply don’t know what it’s like to be an eight-year-old Indian girl who might come across that line in a book. In the same sort of way, we don’t know what it’s like to be a descendent of a slave and come upon a statue of Robert E. Lee. It’s important we spend time listening to those who do know what it’s like, for these are persons of worth and dignity.

Psalm 8 is a hymn of praise which celebrates the majesty of God, and in the process, elevates the dignity of all people. The psalm is addressed directly to God. The words are soaring: “When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established...” Joyce Walker of Zumbro sent me an email on Friday morning. She had just read this week’s Big Idea guide while sitting at a cabin at Lake Tahoe. She paraphrased the psalm: “When I look at the snowcapped mountains above the deep blue waters of Lake Tahoe, how can a person not believe in God when you see such spectacular evidence of a Creator!”

Psalm 8 lifts our sights to the sun and the moon and the snowcapped peaks. The psalm goes on to wonder: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” It’s almost too much to grasp, isn’t it? How is it that the Creator of all the universe pays attention to the likes of you and me? The psalmist hints of humanity’s smallness. He puts us in our place, so to speak, but in a good way. He implies that the Creator *is* paying attention and *does* care for us more than we know. In fact, the Creator has actually put us in charge of this great big, wonderful world.

When we lift our sights, says the psalmist, we discover something about human dignity. Although the psalm doesn’t say it directly, it points to the idea that we are created in the image of God. That doesn’t mean we look like God. But it does mean that we are in a relationship with God, and we’ve been given the assignment of caring for God’s creation. The lakes and the streams, the birds and the trees are part of our job description.

The word the psalmist uses for our caretaking is “dominion.” This is a royal word. We are kings and queens, “crowned with glory and honor,” “a little lower than God.” And if that’s too lofty a thought for you, we can go with the King James Version: “a little lower than the angels.” Each and every one of us has intrinsic worth and is deserving of respect.

The psalm raises our sights, and then it asks us to look around. Truth be told, the view can sometimes be challenging. We can all think of folks who seem to be anything but created in the image of God, folks we’re not even sure we like. Author Anne Lamott humorously speaks to this challenge, but first she turns it around: “You can safely assume you’ve created God in *your own* image,” says Lamott, “when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”

Not only are people challenging, but so are their actions. The mosque here in Rochester gets smeared with bacon grease, and the deed is meant to send a message, “You don’t belong here.” Children get separated from their parents at the border, and some treat it like they’re going to summer camp. An NFL quarterback sexually assaults a female Uber driver, and then gets off with a slap on the wrist. Too often our actions are anything but royal. Pope Francis puts it like this: “How can it be that it is not news when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure but it is news when the stock market loses two points?”

Psalm 8 is telling us to look up and discover our dignity. And it’s telling to look around and see our responsibility. This responsibility covers everything from the number of walleyes in Lake Mille Lacs, to the amount of plastic we consume every day, to the people made in the image of God who are on the journey with us.

So often we lose track of these responsibilities, especially our responsibility to each other. Dean Trulear is the director of an organization called Faith-based Initiatives. He makes a salient point: “Most of the time people tend to look up and blame down.” Sad to say, Trulear isn’t talking about looking up into the starry sky and seeing God. Rather, he’s talking about our all-too-human tendency to “look up” at people who are higher on the economic ladder. We like to identify ourselves with them and so to feel better about our place. At the same time, say Trulear, we tend to “blame down,” meaning that we’re often critical of those below us. We readily scapegoat people poorer than we are as the source of their own problems. We say things like: “If only they would try a little harder, or get their act together, or make something of themselves.” When we say these things, what we often mean is, “If only they would look and think and act more like me.”

Please hear me: I’m not saying that issues of poverty are not complicated, because they are. But blaming the victim is not royal thinking. In Psalm 72, the duties of the king are spelled out. Believe it or not, they’re much like our own duties: to look up and discover our dignity, and to look around and see our responsibilities. Specifically, the king is to defend the cause of the poor, to give deliverance to the needy, to have pity on the weak and lowly. There’s not a hint of blame to be found, but rather a genuine concern for the widows and orphans and those who have lost their way. According to the prophets, if the king does not honor the dignity and worth of all people, then he’s not doing his job.

Do you want an example of what this might look like? We prayed for Dorothy Marshall last Sunday in church. Dorothy had been a regular guest at Open Table. She was struggling with a number of health concerns, including pneumonia and congestive heart failure. Dorothy was in her 80s. She was kind and honest and willing to share her life experiences, both good and bad. She had some family in town, but she considered us to be her family too.

A couple of years ago Dorothy was given a blue prayer shawl that matched her beautiful blue eyes. She wore that prayer shawl every day, and she slept with it at night. She regularly asked for prayers. People invited her to come to church, but it was too hard for her to get here. So Jan Vetter, one of our Care Ministers, took communion to her home. And the time Dorothy spent at Open Table was a kind of family dinner.

I'm sad to say that Dorothy died this past Tuesday night. She was in the hospital. She was at peace. She died in her sleep. She donated her body to the Mayo Clinic. She was hoping - when her cremains are returned - to be laid to rest beside her baby daughter who died several years ago after living only two weeks.

At Open Table on Thursday night, I asked Stephanie, one of Dorothy's friends, if there was going to be a funeral. Stephanie wasn't sure. The family is scattered. They're not particularly close. I gave Stephanie one of my cards and said we'd be honored to have a funeral at Zumbro, if the family agrees. All they have to do is ask. I hope we get the chance. Dorothy was a person of dignity and worth, after all. She was created in God's image, crowned with glory and honor, just a little lower than the angels.

Here's another example. Monday morning I got an email from Jim Peterson. Jim is on the church council. When he heard about my sermon theme for this week, he wanted to tell me about a new sculpture in South Dakota. It's a sculpture on Interstate 90 near Chamberlain. It's a 50-foot-tall statue designed to honor the cultures of the Lakota and Dakota people. The native woman is wearing a dress patterned after a two-hide native dress of the 1850s. She is holding a quilt featuring blue diamond shapes designed to flutter in the wind. After dark, LED lights cause the diamond shapes to glow in the night sky. The artist, Dale Lamphere, says of his work, "My hope is that the sculpture might serve as a symbol of respect and promise for the future." The name of the sculpture? *Dignity*.

We've come a long way since the days of Laura Ingalls Wilder. But we still have a long way to go. In today's political climate, the dignity and worth of all people has been sorely tested. Too many Indians have lost their way. Too many black men are incarcerated. Too many women have been assaulted. Too many Muslims have been viewed with suspicion. Too many children are yet to be reunited with their parents. Too many Dorothys have no one to look after them when they die.

I say, let's keep looking up to discover the God-given dignity that we all share. And let's keep looking around to see the important work God has given us to do. Amen.