

**The Second Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**Sunday, January 19, 2020**  
**The Rev. Scott Walters**

Several centuries ago, people on the island of Yap had a problem. They wanted to transform their barter economy into a money economy. But there was no gold or silver or any of the usual stuff of money to be found where they lived.

But one day, explorers from Yap were visiting other islands, where they discovered these great big wonderful calcite deposits. And they got an idea. Since the stone would have to be transported back to Yap by boat, it would be scarce. So they carved it into circles, some of them as large as twelve feet tall, and called it money. True story.

The people of Yap were happy. They now had their very own currency. So, they no longer had to trade a cow or a field or their labor directly for the other thing they wanted. They could hand over a two thousand pound ring of calcite instead. How convenient!

But maybe you see the problem. Put a coin like that in your pocket and your loincloth's gonna hang a little crooked, right? So, instead of moving the actual stone over to your neighbor's house when you paid that second daughter's dowry, you would just sign over your stone in a document. Even if the coin remained on the side of the road leading out of town.

But the story continues. One day, a money mining crew was returning to the island with one of these unwieldy coins when a storm hit. Their little bamboo boat capsized, the stone fell out, and it sank to the bottom of the sea.

I know what you're thinking. The banking system of Yap collapsed, and an elaborate government bailout followed that involved ropes and pulleys and Micronesian divers breathing through very long reeds. But you're wrong. The sensible people of Yap weren't bothered by the accident at all.

They decided that it really didn't matter if your coin was in your living room or your neighbor's sheep pasture or down at the bottom of the ocean. What mattered was that you had some documented claim on it.

And so, the morning after your life savings literally went overboard, you still could have traded a portion of your stone for a basket of sea cucumbers or a really nice betel nut sheath. (I don't actually know what a betel nut sheath is but they had them in Yap, and it's very fun to say.)

The obvious truth that this story exposes is that some things in this world have no intrinsic value at all, money chief among them. You can make it out of stones or paper or pixels on a screen. The actual value, the true worth, is in the people, not the currency. But even unwieldy circles of stone can take on *meaning*, when their value is tied to the lives and labors of people.

It's when we confuse what, in God's eyes, has real worth, and how meaning is made in our lives, that things seem to go awry.

"The LORD called me before I was born," said the prophet Isaiah. "While I was in my mother's womb he named me." Isaiah is talking about his prophetic call. His deepest identity. And he is telling us that it was not something he has chosen or achieved. It was knit into who he was while he was still coming to be within his mother.

Isaiah had a particular vocation, but Christians and Jews believe the same to be true of each of us. We are creatures made in the image of God. Which means we are each of infinite worth, not as someone else's currency, but simply by being the person God called into being and named as you.

But Isaiah's call says there is another dimension to our lives. Our worth as human beings is the gift of God. *Meaning*, however, is something that none of us finds entirely on our own.

In Isaiah's case, he says he's a polished arrow, hidden away in God's quiver. His life will find meaning as it's put to use by God. Specifically, his life will find meaning as he speaks and works for the restoration of Israel. As Israel is gathered together... restored to right relationship again... healed.

Isaiah was Isaiah, God's beloved and valued child, from before the time he was born. But he would find meaning as was launched into a life of relationship with others.

And to what end does Israel need to be restored? Is it so that they will once again *deserve* to be God's chosen? Is it to prove their worth as a nation? Not at all. They are to be restored to their essential identity as God's people so that their chosen-ness, can find meaning as a light to other nations. To strangers and far off people who were also named as God's own from before they were born.

It's the same pattern, isn't it? The same wisdom. As if it's knit into the very fabric of creation

itself. Our worth...your worth is a fact. Given by God before you could earn it. But our lives take on *meaning* as we give them away. This is a delicate balance to keep but so essential to a flourishing Christian life.

When Dr. King wrote his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," he was living in this tension. He'd been criticized as an outside agitator. A meddler in the affairs of other people in other cities.

To which he wrote, "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid."

Like so many others before and since, Dr. King had been sent out to be a light to others. But, as you probably know, he was not writing this letter to his bitterest enemies and opponents. It was to Birmingham clergy, many of whom thought his cause was generally just. They just thought he should go it a little more slowly.

I doubt Martin Luther King cared much about Bull Connor's opinion of him at this point. But I suspect, as he wrote to his fellow clergy from that cell, he was not only justifying his cause. He also must have been reminding himself that his worth had to rest on something more stable than the perceptions of other people, even those whom he'd trusted and depended on at other times. Even those he'd been sent out to serve.

Isaiah and Dr. King and so many others have called us to live lives of greater wholeness. Grounded lives that better balance *action* and *contemplation*, to use Richard Rohr's terms.

It will take prayer and contemplation and community to deepen the trust that our ultimate value is given only by God. But it will also take action, from the small exchanges of everyday living, to those occasional acts of courageous defiance to which the people of God are sometimes called, especially when the worth and dignity of other children of God is being denied.

You don't have to be a Hebrew prophet or a great civil rights leader for this wisdom to apply. Your value...your worth is just as given. Just as sure. Return to this truth. Remind us of it in love. And remember that it also applies to everyone else you will meet today, no matter how damaged or strayed.

And then let your life be a light. An arrow of God aimed at the restoration of whatever corner of the world you've been shot into. For true meaning for your one wild and precious life, as the poet called it, is only there to be found.