

[2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a](#)

[Psalm 51:1-13](#)

[Ephesians 4:1-16](#)

[John 6:24-35](#)

Sermon by the Rector

Proper 13-B

August 2, 2009

St. Augustine wrote that each human being is a question, posed to him or herself.

Mostly, this question concerns our value, our worth, our importance. "What's my value to the larger world? Am I worthy of the things I'm called to do? Do I matter?"

These questions emerge from three sources.

First: things that are done to us. People, sometimes those we're closest to, expect more of us, or less, than we can offer. They use us as means to their own ends, or project their anxieties, fears and shortcomings onto us. Each of these phenomena makes us wonder about our value. We spend a lot of our adult lives working through the questions raised by things our parents did or said, or failed to do or say.

Second: things we do to ourselves. David has committed adultery with Bathsheba and then had her husband killed. Nathan brings the gravity of David's sin to his awareness, with the parable of the little ewe lamb. David says only, "I have sinned." (Don't we wish more of our own leaders would say as little as David did when scandal overtakes them? Take heed, Mark Sanford and Bernard Madoff.) He has demonstrated his unworthiness to carry out the high office of king that God bestowed on him – to himself, to others and to God.

Third: things that are done for us. I heard it said, to warn us about possible unintended consequences not only of failure, but of success in the Iraq War, that we liberated the French in World War II, and the French have never forgiven us for it. We feel our self-esteem diminish when somebody does something for us that we believe we could have done for ourselves, and it makes us resentful.

The Israelites who ate their fill of the loaves Jesus gave them might be feeling this way. They ate the loaves gladly, but later wonder if it would have been better for Jesus to have sent them off to secure their own suppers. And so they ask: "What should we be doing?", i.e., how can we re-establish our value, our worth, now that you've done something for us we should have done for ourselves?

This question sounds familiar. "What should we be doing?" Beneath it lies the conviction that we can vindicate ourselves – do something to establish, or re-establish, our own value, when something done to us, for us or by us has shaken our confidence.

From beginning to end, though, the Bible teaches that we cannot vindicate ourselves, establish our own value. When we try, we do damage to ourselves and others. In the words of Ephesians, we find ourselves blown to and fro by every new wind of doctrine. In our modern idiom, we let all of our buttons get pushed. We jump to conclusions and form uncharitable judgments. We make mountains out of molehills, but avoid important issues. Sometimes, we do a "Henry Louis Gates". Let's be honest. Who among us has not thought, if not said, "Do you know who I am?", when someone, or some circumstance, calls our importance into question?

Meanwhile, God is ignoring our anxious "What should we be doing?" question. God is vindicating us, establishing our value, by other means.

In our back yard, a seed we forgot we planted blossoms and sprouts. It's time to enjoy, and share, its fruits, without worrying about who gets credit for its growth.

Unexpected crises, or blessings, come, unbidden, into our lives and demand the best we have to offer. By God's mercy, there's no time to reflect on how we're doing, on whether our response makes us look good or not.

Someone we've judged uncharitably offers us just what we need.

Demonstrating the hollowness of a hasty conclusion, God makes room in our hearts for the truth bestowed by patience.

"What should we be doing?", we ask, so that when challenged we can say, "Do you know who I am?"

But listen to Jesus' answer to this question: "Believe". Let God do the vindicating. Disconnect the buttons so easily pushed; take shelter from the shifting winds of doctrine. Watch for things not accommodated by your framework of expectation. Think of what's been done for you, not by you, and keep an eye out for gifts, even unwelcome ones. Jesus calls these things "bread from heaven...which gives life to the world." In them, God will show you what you should be doing – not to establish your own value (that way lies frustration and estrangement), but because God has already done so.