

Who is Worthy?
July 31, 2022
Luke 7:1-10
Rev. Laurie Crelly, East Church
Grand Rapids MI

Country Music star Sammy Kershaw had a catchy hit song several years ago titled She don't know she's beautiful. The Lyrics begin with

“We go out to a party somewhere,
the moment we walk in the door.
People stop and everybody stares.
She don't know what they're staring for.
She don't know she's beautiful (never crossed her mind)
She don't know she's beautiful (no she's not that kind)
She don't know she's beautiful Though time and time I've told her so”

Even if you haven't heard the song you may relate to the sentiment, a dilemma that many people struggle with. Now some would think that the song is about humility, but I hear low self-esteem. That sense of not feeling worthy of the attention or struggling to feel beautiful inside even when our family and friends try to reassure us that we deserve those accolades of beauty or success. Others may see us as beautiful but somehow, we don't see ourselves worthy of the compliments. It's not just around beauty. We may struggle with feeling worthy of love or talented or successful in some way. I think most people struggle with self-esteem issues at some point in life. We are surrounded by all kinds of measures of what is beautiful, successful, attractive, good, and even what is godly.

It boils down to do we feel worthy, do we measure up to some arbitrary, external standard around us. How many of us feel the pressure to look like a celebrity or measure our success against the wealth and accomplishments of others? When we live by such measurements we must ask “When will we be good enough? What is our

reward if we somehow make the mark? Will we finally feel good enough to be loved by God?" Is that how love works? I don't think so and neither did Jesus.

We know that Jesus was often criticized for being around certain "unworthy" people. You know the list, prostitutes, tax collectors, and other supposed "unholy" people. The religious authorities of Jesus' day were very critical of Jesus and even questioned his credentials as a religious person and teacher because of it. Jesus on the other hand, was critical of the many rules they tried to keep and force others to adhere to. In Matthew's Gospel we find a series of woes that Jesus directly points at the Pharisees. Here are a few lines from the passage in Matthew 23: 13-14, 23, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to." "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."

This arbitrary application of the law allowed the religious leaders to create a system of insiders and outsiders that they alone could name. Those who were in their favor and therefore deemed worthy and others who fail to make the grade. We know this is not unique to Jesus' time or context, we can easily point to people and institutions who do this even today. This structure for morality may have started out with good intentions but over time more and more rules are added. It can become easily abused and impossible to achieve over time. According to our Old Testament texts, Moses received the Ten Commandments as the basis of their new society. Over the following years it became books of rules like Leviticus and Deuteronomy numbering hundreds of additional rules. Over the centuries these grew as more and more people attempted to interpret and make exceptions or work arounds that no one could fully adhere to. Paul too had tried to earn his own righteousness in persecuting the church. But once confronted by Christ and saved he understood his own pursuit of righteousness was a

false belief. He discusses this at length in his letter to the Romans. In Romans 3 he writes, “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”

This incomplete moral construct is based on a system of rewards and punishments and is characterized by fear and shame. I am not saying we cannot nor should not have any rules, but we need to acknowledge their limitations and hazards in this model of morality. This form of morality sets up a scale of better and worse people and is at its core, motivated by selfish gain. What can I do to gain approval by this external authority? This measurement of whether someone is good or bad is based on how closely they personally follow the rules.

Jesus spoke out against this form of morality and was challenged by the lawyers of the law on more than one occasion and often asked why he and his disciples broke the law. Jesus was asked which was the greatest commandment he replied with two; “love the lord your God with all your heart, mind, body and soul and the second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus went on to explain that by following these two commands that one would naturally fulfill the intent of not just the law but the prophets as well. He cut the adherence to the law back to the basic component – the intent or spirit of the law – love of God and neighbor. When we look at the Ten Commandments, we see that all of them are rules with the intention to guide us to deeper love of God and our fellow human. The first three being about loving God, the fourth – the sabbath about loving ourselves and the rest directed at loving others. If you love others you don’t lie, speak bad of them, kill them, covet their things and so forth.

Last week we talked about who our neighbor was and saw how it was not based on proximity but based on our own sense of compassion and care for them. This intent of the Great Commandment. Jesus is reminding us of the power of Love to motivate us to

do right. When we truly love others, we seek to improve their lives, we seek to care for them. Even the commandment points to this motivation. Love our neighbor as we would love ourselves or how we would want to be loved.

In the Gospel story today, we see this reward and punishment system in place in the hearts of the people. The Jewish leaders tell Jesus that the Centurion is worthy because of what he has done for Capernaum hoping it will be enough to earn a healing. The Centurion is a “Good Roman” still an outsider, but he is different. Jesus makes no comment on the good deeds that the Centurion has done, but only acknowledges his great faith in seeking this healing. The Centurion, also feeling under this measure of worthiness says he is not worthy to have Jesus come to him. He still sees himself as separate from the Jewish community even though he has expressed a deep love for them. His motivation for the healing is based on love first which led him to a deep faith in Jesus.

Our worth is not measured by our adherence to some arbitrary rules. Our worth is not measured by how well we practice the rituals of the tradition. No, the measure is not found with us but found with God. It is God who makes us worthy because God first loves us and is moved by that love to action. This is what we call Grace. The unmerited favor of God. God loves us and seeks to restore us. Period. There is nothing we can do to earn that love or lose that love.

To be called a Follower of Christ, a true Christian, is to acknowledge and receive that unconditional love and to share it with others without strings attached. We are called to be in community so that this love may be multiplied, grown among us and shared with a hurting world that has been labeled by the world as “unworthy”.

This is the last of our series called the Outsiders. This sermon title was “Who is Worthy?” and the clear answer is “We are all worthy because God has made us worthy.”