

## A Treasured Possession

On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. <sup>2</sup> They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, <sup>3</sup> while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: <sup>4</sup> ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. <sup>5</sup> Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; <sup>6</sup> and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

<sup>7</sup> So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. <sup>8</sup> All the people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD. <sup>9</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever.”

Last Spring, my 17 year old daughter urged me to watch *13 Reasons Why* on Netflix. Since as a college professor I always want insight into what makes young people tick I watched it. It was not a joy to watch, but I kept with it to the end of the series. It is the story of a young woman who takes her life because she was constantly bullied by peers and let down by friends in her high school. I kept thinking that the series was filled with exaggerations. That is, some kids might have a tough go of it in some high schools, but overall the series was fairly “over the top” or hyperbolic. Surely, high schools aren’t nearly as bad as the series makes them out to be. It was clear to me that most kids aren’t bullied and if there is bullying it isn’t very serious. But when I asked my daughter just how accurate she felt the movie was in portraying contemporary high school life, I was surprised to hear her say that she felt it was spot on. So, I asked one of my college classes if they had seen this series and if they felt it was accurate. I was surprised just how many had seen it and that most felt it was pretty accurate. If these young people are

right, then my instincts about bullying are wrong. There is a lot of bullying and it can be quite vicious and cruel.

What really catches me off guard, though, is that these same college students who agree that bullying is quite a problem, and who are themselves just out of high school, don't seem either to be bullies or to have been bullied. Perhaps they cover themselves up pretty well. Many, if not most, of my students are the "Sir, yes sir!" variety: they are polite, respectful, and kind, even if they are not as studious as I might wish they would be. Perhaps now that they are in a new environment, in college, they are starting over, charting a new path, one in which they no longer play the role of either bully or victim. I hope that is the case!

It strikes me that high school youth, like many adults, struggle with matters of "identity." My hunch tells me that to be human means that at times anyone will struggle with questions about who they really are. But I also think that these anxieties are aggravated in our modern era. I remember on occasion having bad days at high school back in the 70s. I would go home, go to my bedroom, close the door, and "chill" or "veg out." Eventually my peace of mind was restored. How different for many high schoolers today. I suspect that they go to bed with their phone and this inhibits their ability to unwind or get "down time." Instead, they are incessantly plagued by Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and other annoyances that disturb their peace of mind. And, unfortunately, they don't know when to quit.

How very different was our country a century ago. No cell phones then. And, the majority of Americans still lived on the farm. They didn't have to struggle with identity as much as we do because there were not a lot of options or roles to choose from. There's no choosing about when to milk the cows, or shoveling in the barn, or when to harvest, or when to mend fences. These are all chores which simply must be done for people to survive. When one is

working hard with 14-hour days, every day, and with physical labor, not much time can be spent on the question of who one really is, whether or not one is accepted, whether life has meaning, and the like. Those questions hardly matter. But at some point the scales tipped: by the 1920s or so more and more people moved to the big city, no longer worked such back-breaking jobs, and had time to explore their own identity. Professors have a word for the approach to life that has arisen from this. They call it the “ethics of authenticity.” What this means is that the purpose of life is for you to become more of who you are, provided no one is hurt in the process. But, the quest of such self-discovery comes at a cost. That cost can be said pretty simply: there is no clear standard, rubric, or metric by which to determine your authenticity, your real self. And those who aim to accumulate as much pleasure in life as they can, provided that they do no harm to others, often find themselves to be very unhappy. Think of the Kardashians!

I kept thinking about the young female protagonist in *13 Reasons Why*: what if she had a supportive church youth group in which to establish solid friendships? Would that have helped her? No doubt church youth groups aren't perfect. But there is more hope in them for the well-being of youth than purely secular venues. Why? Because, though I understand this is not always the case, the ideal of Christ-like behavior of love would be welcomed among church youth.

Identity remains an important matter, not just for youth seeking to “find themselves,” but for all of us. One of the most important things that happens in the Christian faith is that God establishes your identity. He did so in the days when most folks lived on the farm and he still does so today. Sure, that goes against our culture which says that the onus is on you to establish your own identity. But there is something really positive about God establishing your identity for you. You don't have to worry about a standard, measure, metric, or rubric by which to figure

out if you have really pulled off authenticity. Instead, God breaks that all apart for you, just as he did for Israel. God says point blank to you: *you are my treasure*. You are precious to God, just like jewels may well be precious to you.

The Hebrew word for “treasured possession” is *segula*. As I understand it, a Hebrew woman, not having pockets or aprons, let alone safes or safety deposit boxes, would chisel a hole through a coin or precious metal, and hang this treasured possession by a chain around her neck, keeping the treasure close to her heart. This is how God gives you an identity: you are a precious gem, close to the heart of God.

Remember the original context in which God gives this identity to his people: he had brought them “on eagles’ wings” out of bondage, out of slavery, out of servitude to Pharaoh, and was in the process of bringing them to the promised land. Let’s go back to *13 Reasons Why*: picking on someone over time can really affect that persons’ behavior. They lose confidence in their ability to succeed. They doubt their own instincts. They feel sorrowful a good portion of the time. And, they often get used to it, so they don’t know who they would be if they weren’t bullied! Pharaoh and his minions were tyrants. To enslave people is worse than bullying them. But God is a promise-keeping God. God who promised Abraham and Sarah descendants, land, and to bless them, had no intention of allowing his people to be slaves forever. Pharaoh and his minions paid for their bullying as they drowned in the Red Sea. God rescued his people; they had always been a treasured possession, a *segula*, even when they were slaves.

God proves his truthfulness in deed, rescuing the people from slavery, and in word, validating them, granting them a new identity. They are no longer slaves; they are free. They are no longer objects of mistreatment, but instead cherished and prized. God affirms his people not because they are perfect but because they are his people. This is why God is so adamant in

pursuing prodigals. God's love defines his children, not their misdeeds, or for that matter, *even their good deeds!* This simply spells out our common Reformation heritage: not even our good works save us, but instead faith alone in the power of Jesus' blood to cleanse us from sin.

Driven by our quests for authenticity, for really becoming and affirming ourselves, we seek to validate ourselves by the stuff or the experiences we accumulate. Insecure to the core, we are jealous of what others have and often feel we are missing out. To top it all off, we suffer with what the French call *anomie*, a restless feeling of purposelessness. That leads us to ask: is keeping up with the Joneses really worth it? How can we really know that all our efforts to validate ourselves really does the trick?

How different is our God! We seek to validate ourselves by how many experiences we check off the bucket list or how much stuff we accumulate. In contrast, God doesn't need any such things to make him love us either more or less. The "Rock of Ages" teaches us: "nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." God will have us on no other basis than that we humbly admit that everything we have is a gift. Every breath of air we take, every swallow we make, everything we see or do: it's all a gift. It is all grace. It is all mercy. When it hits home that it's all a gift, what other choice do we have other than to thank and praise, serve and obey our God?

When you read the scriptures it's tempting to think of the Holy Land as a big place. We imagine it panoramically like a 1950s Hollywood big screen epic, with Pharaoh's army pursuing Charleston Hesston (as Moses), or David standing up against Goliath and all the Philistine hordes, or Israel's defenders as gorilla warriors (like Judas Maccabeus) fending off the mighty legions of Babylon, Greece, or Rome. Now, all these big armies did in fact envelop the holy land. But our imaginations about the holy land's geography are greatly exaggerated. It's a little

place. It's only 70 miles from the Dead Sea to the Sea of Galilee. To put some perspective on that, it's 84 miles from Birmingham to Huntsville!

God gave Abraham land. . . . but not a big imperial landscape, like Russia, China, or the USA. Back in the 70s Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir once teased how Moses could lead the children of Israel to the one place in the Middle East without oil. God loves his people not because they are mighty or full of wealth or prestige. If you have a child you love that child not because of the awards, medals, or trophies accumulated, or even because of that child's looks, but instead because that child belongs to you. When you look into that child's eyes, you love him or her regardless of what anyone else in the world thinks of him or her.

In the same way, you, a sinner, are beloved by God. God loves you not because you are a sinner or because you are a saint (though in fact you are both at the same time) but because you belong to him. You are God's cherished and priceless treasure. It is for this reason that God sent his Son. God is angry at sin. This is because God cares about his creation and creatures. Nothing can quell that wrath other than God himself. The Son came to the world not so much because we owe God a debt that as sinners we cannot render. Instead, in Christ God does not so much fix the crack within creation caused by sin and death but instead comes to make all things new.

In closing, during Lent I sometimes listen to J S Bach's St. Matthew's Passion, an oratorio which presents the story of Christ's suffering and death based on the gospel of Matthew. It is potent and powerful music. But as stirring as it is I am always left dissatisfied with it. Why? In this music, Bach gets us to Good Friday. But he doesn't get us to Easter. Now, no doubt it wasn't his intention to get us to Easter. After all, this is music for Lent. But what is Lent without Easter? What is Jesus' suffering all about apart from the Resurrection?

Dear friends, the Lord is risen! Jesus rose precisely that the truth will hit home with you that you are God's treasured possession, God's *segula*. This you will be not only today and tomorrow but also forever.