

**Proper 7A June 21, 2020**  
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**Even the Hairs on Your Head**  
**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH**

*Even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid, you are of more value than many sparrows. Matthew 10:30-31*

The most memorable time I heard those words from our Gospel reading today was several years ago when I attended a huge annual preaching conference where clergy from all over the country gather to listen to some of the very best preachers in the Episcopal, Methodist, and Lutheran Churches. I listened to preaching workshops and sermons written just for fellow preachers. In a sermon preached by theologian Walter Brueggemann he used this scripture to encourage us preachers to not be afraid to preach hard truths because God sees us and values us. Not us as a collective of preachers from around the country, but as individuals who will return to our individual parishes to preach, teach and serve. During his sermon, Brueggemann invited us to put our hands on our heads and run our fingers through our hair to try and feel every single strand of hair on our heads. He asked us if we could even imagine counting all those strands of hair. Then he said God knows us so intimately God already knows how many strands of hair are on your head right now, that's how much God loves and how much God values us. I have to admit that was the first time I had taken that verse of scripture seriously. I had always imagined it as a pretty metaphor or figure of speech, but here was a prominent theologian with a playful light dancing in his eyes telling us God values us so much God has invested time and energy in knowing us as individuals, can distinguish us from others in a crowd, and this was surprisingly comforting and empowering at the same time: the realization that God values each and every person.

Some people find that hard to believe. We have been conditioned to see value in large numbers, big crowd sizes; that it is only large numbers of same-thinking people that gain momentum and spur change into action; that it is of little consequence if we lose one person or a few people for the good of many people, so we can forget the value of a person. Seeing the value in each person as beloved of God is one way we followers of Jesus are called (as Walter Brueggemann reminded me in his sermon) to be and live counter to the prevailing cultural norm.

Walter Brueggemann isn't the only one who reminds me of this truth. You might remember I have been a fan of the long running BBC science fiction television program *Doctor Who* for most of my life. In many episodes of *Doctor Who* I often recognize counter cultural Judeo-Christian themes. Most recently this theme of

valuing an individual and the impact one person can make was brought up in Episode Eight of Season Twelve of *Doctor Who* called *The Haunting of Villa Diodati*, where The Doctor and her companions pay a visit to the author of *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley on the night she was inspired to write the book that is believed to be start of the science fiction genre. In the episode it was discovered that Mary Shelley's husband accidentally absorbed a powerful interactive alien database called the Cyberium, which contains knowledge for the creation of a new and more monstrous version of one of The Doctor's enemies called the Cybermen. The Cybermen are cyborgs, machines in human form that convert individual human beings into cyborgs by removing their brains and putting them into identical metal bodies. These metal bodies lack gender, age, race, color, religion, politics, any sort of individuality. Their minds are inhibited so they cannot think for themselves; they cannot feel any emotion or connection to any other life form. Theirs' is a solitary conformity. For the Cybermen, there is no value in the individual, there is only pain. A pain the Cybermen promise to delete, to erase all your anxieties, your aches and pains, your broken heart, your weary soul, and if you lose your joy and delight, that is the price you pay for being "upgraded" into a supposedly superior although frighteningly violent being. This is what makes the Cybermen terrifying monsters in the world of *Doctor Who*.

In this episode, Mary Shelley's husband offered to let the Cyberium kill him to keep it from the villain, called the Lone Cyberman, who wanted the Cyberium so he could create a new army of Cybermen. When The Doctor's companions suggest perhaps that is the best thing to do, to sacrifice one person so that billions of people will not die, The Doctor turned on them and said that was unacceptable. Because the possibility of losing that one person could mean the world as they knew it would be so much less than it is, that one person will contribute so much in so many ways. In the particular case of Percy Shelley, he will be the person who will inspire Mary Shelley to write *Frankenstein*, and his own written words will inspire so many other people far beyond his own lifetime. For The Doctor, one person – no matter who they are - is infinitely valuable, their death is unacceptable, and that is a belief she isn't willing to compromise, even if it means more work for her later. In that episode, The Doctor showed us what Walter Brueggemann and Jesus was talking about in Matthew's Gospel reading for today.

In today's Gospel Jesus was talking about how those of us who follow him will face challenges and might be afraid to live how he teaches us to live. Sometimes it is like that, sometimes we can find ourselves in situations where it is easier to follow the status quo than it is to follow Jesus. It doesn't have to be big situations like saving the life of one person The Doctor found herself in in *Villa Diodati*; it could be something as small as using someone's preferred personal pronoun, or listening to a person of color

instead of explaining their feelings to them, it could be taking the time to learn about the COVID-19 virus from scientific sources, to critically think through those bits that magically appear on your Facebook feed that either terrify you or try to convince you there is no need to make changes. Even wearing a face mask covering your nose and mouth when you go out can be a way to show each person you encounter has value, because we are learning that wearing face masks doesn't necessarily protect us from being in contact with COVID-19 as much as it protects others from potentially getting the virus from us. When we wear a mask, we are telling people we value you, we don't want you to get sick.

This reminder can be both comforting and encouraging, as I felt when I heard Walter Brueggemann preach and when I watched *Doctor Who*, and that is what we need right now. Because the rest of today's Gospel has Jesus talking about division in one of those hard to understand scriptures. If God values us so much, you might ask, why would Jesus bring division? The answer is because Jesus is not a cyber master trying to convert us all into cyborgs devoid of feeling and individuality. Jesus came because God is up to something new, the bringing of God's Kingdom here to earth. This began with Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and it is still happening through the Holy Spirit. When Jesus said the words in today's Gospel about setting family members against one another he was quoting from the prophet Micah (it can be found in Micah 7:6) who predicted division every time God was up to something new. Scholar and former Bishop of Durham N.T. Wright observed this division happens every time the Church is called to something new, which makes it one of our oldest traditions.

As we find ourselves in the midst of a pandemic that is causing so much change to our world and to our church, today's Gospel might challenge us to see our current situation through both the lens of being valued by God, who is with us, and who may be up to something right now. As we watch some businesses re-open and we have to use our critical thinking skills to assess what risks are worth taking, and we are beginning to have conversations about returning to in-person worship, as we see cries for justice rise up, as we hear of the disproportionate numbers of African Americans and Native Americans dying from COVID-19, perhaps God is somehow in the midst of it all calling to us to pay attention, even to the stuff that is hard to look at, to use this as an opportunity to motivate us to change what we can, to respond to our current crisis in a way that like The Doctor showed how she values every human being, regardless of age, skin color, economic status, gender, or sexual orientation. Maybe it means feeling some grief over what we may lose or have lost. Maybe it means facing our fears of the different, the unknown. Maybe it means facing the pain of learning what we don't want to learn about our past, our country, or the church. Maybe that is why Jesus says

to not be afraid not once but three times in today's Gospel reading while reminding his listeners each and every one of them – just like you- is of tremendous value to God.

Maybe in these times we need that reminder, reassurance, and encouragement.

So, beloved of God, let's try it. After all, you are safe at home, right? No one is around to give you a sideways glance. No need to feel uncomfortable. Let's do it. Take your hands and run them through your hair. Let your fingers feel each and every strand, if you can. Can you imagine counting all those individual hairs? God already has counted them today; God knows how many strands of hair are on your head. And how many freckles you have, or wrinkles; God knows the story behind every scar on your body. You are of infinite value to God. So, do not be afraid of the changes around you, you are not in this alone, I am here with you. And together with the Holy Spirit, we can be on the lookout for the resurrection life that is on the loose calling us to do that Kingdom of Heaven work in these times.