

God's Values

Romans 12:1-8

The Reverend Erica Wimber Avena

August 23, 2020

Prayer: O God, what will it profit us if we gain the whole world, but forfeit the fullness of life you intend? As we approach this time of reflection, help us to resolve to live in harmony with those around us, and to see through the things that do not matter, keeping our eyes fixed upon what does...

Bears. There could be bears.

When I was in first grade and my sister was a preschooler, my family took a cross country road trip one summer. One of the highlights was staying in these simple one room cabins in Yellowstone national forest. They were unfinished rustic wood cabins with a picnic table outside – but in the most spectacular natural setting. There were signs up all around that said do not feed the bears. As we were driving in we watched a family feeding a bear a package of Oreo cookies out their car window – I wanted to do that too, but it was explained to me in no uncertain terms that it was wrong. I was very excited to see bears. Next to our cabin there were heavy weights and chains on the trash cans to keep the bears out.

In the middle of the night I was awakened by crashing outside our cabin. I got up and there out the window, about 9 feet away from me, I saw in the moonlight a bear who had got the lid off of the trash can closest to us, despite the weights and chains. Beside myself with excitement, I woke up my sister, come look! Come look! And because she was too short to see out the window I lifted her as best I could up to the window. But my sister was heavy for me, and I could only just lift her enough to get her face close to the glass, I watched in frustration as her breath on the window fogged up the glass -- she could see nothing. My arms ached as I tried to get her to defog the glass, but her coordination wasn't good enough and I had to set her down again. My parents made it clear they didn't want to be disturbed. I watched alone in fascination as the magnificent, enormous bear went through the trash can. Thrilled! Amazed! I couldn't look away!

The next morning, no one believed me. They hadn't seen the bear, my sister said there was no bear, because all she had seen was the condensation of her own breath on the glass – and she complained about me waking her up in the middle of the night. My father, irritated, picked up the trash strewn all around, but he pointed out there was nothing definitive that a bear had been there, he said it could have been a raccoon. They all knew I wanted to see a bear. My testimony wasn't believed – had Erica seen a bear, or had she only wanted to see a bear?

I was small, I wasn't strong enough to hold my sister up, I wasn't willing to get my parents up, and I saw a bear. And no one believed me. ...There were no cell phones for photographic evidence.

Have you ever been not believed? Has someone ever undermined your truth? There could be bears...

Paul is encouraging the early church to stay with their truth, “do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed...”

Paul is reminding the early church that God values us very differently than the world does. And he gives the early church this wonderful metaphor, – you are like members of one body; and each of you are important, vital parts not in spite of, but because of, your differences. He is asking them to value one another differently than they are valued in the world. So to be a Christian, is to have a kind of double consciousness about others, certainly we recognize one another as we appear in the world, but we also are challenged to recognize one another as vital members of the body we are a part of. People of all ages, skin colors, birth rights, educations, net worth, and skills. And even more so now, that so many of us are separated by pandemic protocols. Just because we are not seeing one another doesn't mean we are not connected in important ways – relying on one another.

We are in an age when many of us are being conformed in directions we would rather not go. If we aren't suffering from Covid-19 directly, many of us are suffering from what they are calling Covid fatigue. Many are facing unemployment, others are threatened with job loss, and all it takes is one person in a family to face this and the whole family is destabilized. Other crises not related to Covid going on during this pandemic just makes everything harder.

Paul is asking the early Christians to remember who they are, whose they are, how they are valued by God; do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed...

One of the great things about the Christian camping experience at Silver Lake, is that this set apart environment provides a context to let another way of valuing people emerge -- to find a way to celebrate the diversity we are, the shy kid who is ignored at school makes friends at camp, the funny looking kid totally rocks a skit at campfire time, the one who feels hopeless finds she is not alone, that lots of others feel what she does, and even need her...

Silver Lake is closed, they did an online experience this summer – not a replacement for the usual programs, but a way to connect. But the Holy Spirit is not closed. And although the Covid challenges continue, we can be reminded that God values us, deeply. And to deny that is to really miss all the beauty, the meaning, and yes, the love. Be transformed by the renewing of your minds...

Plus, there could be bears... !

© 2020 Rev. Erica Wimber Avena

First Church West Hartford
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107