

# Sermon Text for March 14, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

## *Habakkuk 3:17-19, Philippians 3:7-11*

### *“What do we value?”*

It has been a week of extremes here at FPC. On Friday we celebrated the resurrection of Harold Wiker while we mourned a pillar of this community. He had his hand in so many things around Strasburg and he was so well respected and loved as well. Also during this week we went from mourning the passing of Harold to celebrating the birth of James Ryan Fulmer, a clear time to celebrate and give thanks. This week we had members of the church in surgery for significant life altering procedures and others who continue to grapple with the financial and emotional and mental fallout that this pandemic has created. We continue to tap into and try to come to the aid of those who are in need and those who are rejoicing in so many different ways.

We find ourselves as a county with a bit of a hopeful future as a vaccine center has opened and more and more of you are getting vaccinated. Even while we face the sobering reality that over 530,000 lives have been claimed during this pandemic as a result to a losing battle with the virus. In the midst of these extremes in which we find ourselves we have been forced to consider what do we value? We have been forced to evaluate our lives. Have you discovered during this time what truly has value in your life? What is most important for you? Can we say as Paul does in Scripture that we have kept the faith and is actually keeping the faith the most important goal of our life. Let's think about that as we look at our second Scripture.

### **READ**

We find ourselves in our first lesson in a book of the Bible that we don't normally look at and pause to consider often. Habakkuk is a book of the Bible which describes a prophet of the Lord who is in a context that we are somewhat familiar. Like Isaiah, and Jeremiah and Ezekiel the nation of Israel finds itself surrounded by hostile nations and this time it is Babylon who is not only making their life miserable but actually attacking the nation and eventually will take them off into captivity and slavery. During this time of Habakkuk's ministry the Babylonians also manage to burn down the temple, the place considered the house of God, the ultimate act which can only produce within the people a sense of desperation and complete loss. God is no longer on His throne.

The prophet Habakkuk in this writing asks that question that is lingering in the back of our minds: Why if God is just and caring do believers suffer? For our sake we can take that

question that comes out of this Scripture and ask: how do we find joy in the midst of our suffering and utter hopelessness? Joy is not expected within this context, yet did you hear what Clayton shared with us? Did you hear what the prophet is able to state? Let's look at it again.

The fig tree doesn't blossom, no fruit from it. No oil from the olive, upon which as a society we subsist, the fields giving no food, our animals are dying in the field, and we have none in the our stalls. This is the result of the reality that we are facing, the Babylonians have attacked and destroyed all that which value, all that is important to us..., or so we think. Look at vs. 18: Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will exult in the God of my salvation because God is my strength. I rejoice not because we have what we value but because God has us, we are His, he provides us with strength. Give me the worst case possible, the worst scenario that I could face, the temple destroyed, our livelihood not only in jeopardy but disappeared, and I will rejoice. What do we value?

What a message during this time as people have placed value on things and ways of being and stances on issues and things that have divided and separated and become the most important aspect of this time of the pandemic. We have been drawn away from our faith in God and placed our faith on that which has become an idol. Idolatry has reared its ugly head around us and the only way to combat that is to ask that question which Habakkuk forces us to ask and which Paul is going to address: What do we value, what is important to us?

Let's look at Philippians because Paul is consistently reaching out with this message to us of make sure you are aware of what your decisions are and what they reflect as far as what you consider valuable, important enough to shape your future and impact your relationships. We have skipped a few verses in Philippians as we find ourselves once again in this time of being surprised by Joy. Paul has been encouraging this community that he loves, this church in Philippi, to be aware and be careful of people within the community of faith who are trying define faith by certain rules and regulations.

Paul shares his resume as someone who went to the best schools, was trained by the best teachers, obeyed the law and the religious mandates better than anyone, so if anyone could be justified by following the rules, it would be him. But the religious rules, he tells the Philippians, even for someone like him, are not what defines our relationship to God. God does not embrace us because we follow His laws, God embraces us because he loved us first even before we knew how to love him. As we read in Micah what does the Lord require of you? Not sacrifices, not rigid obedience to the law, that doesn't make your righteous, but rather to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly.

Look at vs.8, he says that he would throw away all of his education and all of his right actions and sacrifices in order to maintain his personal relationship with Jesus Christ. There is nothing more important for a person of faith than to have a tangible, real, personal relationship with God. This relationship is not measured with how obedient we are to the law, but rather how we are able to embrace the love that God has for us on a daily basis. This is what has value, our personal relationship to Jesus Christ. All of these things that the world values and thinks draws you closer to God, a degree from Princeton, a generational line of Presbyterian pastors, references and acquaintances that are a listing of who's who in the religious, social justice, and academic world, he would be willing to give it all away, consider it as vs.8 states "rubbish". Do you know what this term in the Greek is, actually? Poop, I would consider it poop, worthless in relationship to my love for Christ and especially for His love for me.

Normally when we think of our relationship to God we think of it being based on giving up bad things that create barriers to our time with God. Here Paul is actually saying that I would be willing to give up good things, a good education, a good family, a good upbringing, generational faith, it is worthless in respect to my faith in God. These things that are good and are considered valuable by society, and by us, what we possess in these fields can actually take away from what is ultimately the most valuable which we find in vs.9: the righteousness of God based on faith. Do we value more than anything as Paul states in vs. 9 the righteousness of God based on faith.

Are we willing to lose all things so that we can gain Christ? What would it be like to leave your house, your business, your farm, your family, your health, your security, and follow Christ. Think about each one. I am not saying that Christ is calling you to give that up, but what if he were, could you do it? What if as a church we were called to leave this building, to give it up, for the sake of Christ, could we do it? Sometimes we value the bricks and mortar of this building more than we do people and a relationship with God which is based on faith.

You can have a church without a building but you can't have a church without people. That is why we worked so hard to keep us together during this time because it is not meeting in this building that defines us, it is the life experiences we have been through outside of this building that makes us a church. I know what it is like to be a pastor of a church that doesn't own a single building. You learn to value people more and stuff less. We had our first meeting this past week of the Community Impact Committee and we had to keep reminding ourselves that the purpose of this group is not to create programs for the benefit of us, the members, but rather to create ideas that would service the community and especially those defined in Matthew 25 as the poor, the hungry, the naked, the prisoner, the stranger, the thirsty.

What is important to us? What has value to us? How about a house that on the bottom floor has a director who lives there and there is a food bank and a clothing bank, and one day a medical clinic, and another day a place for financial advice, and the upstairs can house three people who are homeless, and meals are served there for our food bank clients on a weekly basis. It could be called the CIC house and it could become the hub of social ministry here in Strasburg. That might have tremendous value as a reflection of our faith in Jesus Christ. As we live to focus on the righteousness of God which is based on our faith.

Is God calling us away from a normal way of doing church, a safe way of doing church, and requiring us to act justly, love mercy, and to walk humbly? Together as a family we are not on the path to self-improvement. Paul is not saying that Christianity is a better religion and therefore attractive to anyone on the lookout for improvement of one's station in life. Paul doesn't view our experiences of the past as totally negative, a failure in every way. No matter what you have been through and no matter what you have valued in the past, it is something you can use and God can use now as we refocus our values on the righteousness of God found in faith in Jesus Christ.

Notice Paul is asking us to do something that Jesus has already done. Jesus emptied himself and did not count equality with God as something to exploit. Being equal with God is a good thing, but He gave up the benefits that come with that so that He could serve us, and I use that word serve purposefully. Joy comes not because we have what we value, but because God has us, we are His. Habakkuk teaches us that joy is found in knowing God. Paul reminds us that what we value, while good, can still become an idol.

Today, I want you to go home and ask yourself that question of what is it that you value in life and is that a barrier to your relationship with God? It doesn't have to be, but it can be. Would we be willing to consider it rubbish for the sake of relationship with God which provides joy even in the midst of the worst imaginable tragedies. Amen.