

GOD'S MEASURE OF MATURITY

Some years ago the Raleigh, North Carolina News & Observer published an article entitled: "How Do You Measure Up As A Man?" The article stated that some extensive research had been conducted on the 20th century standards for measuring a man. The criteria were quite interesting and I thought that I might list them for the men here this morning just to see how they measure up.

1. His ability to make and conserve money.
2. The cost, style and age of his car.
3. (This is my favorite) How much hair he has.
4. His strength and size.
5. The job he holds and how successful he is at it.
6. What sports he likes.

7. How many clubs he belongs to.

8. His aggressiveness and reliability.

All the toys, all the marbles, all the power and popularity, that's what little boys are made of...we want it all.

Of course, one day we have to grow up. And on that day, little boys realize that the thing we thought was our most prized possession or ideal...wasn't really worth much at all.

Growing up, maturity, striving toward something extraordinary like an ideal that you can never reach but it is in the trying that gives us character...that kind of maturity...this is the theme that runs through the scriptures this morning. There will come a day when we all have to grow up.

But when does that day arrive? Little boys seem to continue to be little boys even well into their 70's and 80's sometimes; they write irrelevant articles like the one I read just a minute ago; they are always measuring their worth by standards that are meaningless and unimportant in the light of the magnificence of life. It seems that little boys continue to want to be little boys. So when will that day of maturity and transformation happen?

Let me tell you a story about a man who once came to Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of the book, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People", and said to him: "Two weeks ago, for the first time in my life I went to the funeral of a man my own age. I didn't know him well, but we worked together, talked to each other from time to time,

and had kids about the same age. He died suddenly over the weekend. A bunch of us went to the funeral, each of us thinking, "It could just as easily have been me."

That was two weeks ago. They have already replaced him at the office. I hear his wife is moving out of state to live with her parents. Two weeks ago, he was working fifty feet away from me, and now it's as if he never existed.

It's like a rock falling into a pool of water. For a few seconds, it makes ripples in the water, and then the water is the same as it was before, but the rock isn't there anymore.

Rabbi, I've hardly slept at all since then. I can't stop thinking that it could happen to me, that one day it will happen to me, and a few days later, I will be forgotten as if I had never lived. Shouldn't a man's life be more than that?" (Adapted

from Rabbi Harold Kushner, When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough, p. 20. By Mickey Anders, "The Beatitudes Are Not Platitudes!")

This man had just experienced a wakeup call, and that day of maturity and growing up arrived. That 40-something year old little boy who asked that question to Rabbi Kushner finally grew up to be a man who realizes that the things he thought were important are just meaningless.

This brings us to the question of what is really important in life...

Here's the answer: a strong relationship with God. That's God's measure of maturity...the strength of your relationship with God.

But of course I'd say that, right, we are in a church, that's what I am paid to say, but it can't be true...can it? I mean all

our lives we are conditioned and programmed by society to believe that living a good life, having a good family, being a good citizen, helping out when you can and doing the best you can with what you've been given, that's the measure of maturity and the ideal in which we struggle to achieve: being good and humble enough.

The answer to God's measure of maturity can't only be the strength of our relationship with God...that's only part of the resume that shows that we are a good and humble person...not the whole document, right?

That is not what the scriptures tell me this morning. Micah and Matthew say that God's measure of maturity in a man or woman is the strength of their relationship with God.

The prophet Micah writes that the Lord's case and legal argument against the people of Israel, including himself, is too difficult to attain...this ideal of completely following the Torah law is out of the question for a normal human being. "It's not you Lord, it's us", Micah writes "You, O Lord, have brought us out of the land of Egypt, you gave us safe passage through the wilderness even when kings like Balak of Moab wanted to destroy the Israelites wandering in the desert, God saved us by changing the mind of Balaam son of Beor through an angel and a talking donkey."

But what can we do to measure up to your wonders, O Lord? How can we perfectly keep the Law you have given us with all of the distractions of money, other religions, politics, news, and trying to finally get ahead in life? What do you

want from us that will appease you? Shall I come before you with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?' Just tell us one toy, marble, or position of power we need to give up to you so that it will make you go away and not be angry anymore and you will leave us alone in peace. Sounds like little boy talk, doesn't it?

Here is God's answer to the question of maturity and measuring up: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. In other words, be strong in your relationship with God.

But it is not our justice or definition of kindness or even walking humbly with God that means anything...but it is being full of God's justice, God's loving kindness and mercy, full of God's humbleness, meekness, and giving up all in order to find something greater. "Be humble as I am humble, be just as I am just, be kind and loving and merciful as I am merciful...in other words be perfect or mature as your Heavenly Father is mature" says the Lord.

The great thing about a relationship with God is that we are not left alone to struggle to achieve this ideal, the Kingdom of God is right here, right now. And that's Jesus' message to the people, he says "One day you may come to that terrible day when you grow up from little boys and girls to becoming men and women, and that day will probably be a day of

pain, suffering, sorrow, or grief. But I am here to tell you that even if that day is today, when you have nothing left to give to God but your broken and battered self...that is the day when you will realize that God only wants you...not your stuff or your good life by doing the best you can."

Jesus goes on to say that "If that day of maturity and growing up is a day of being poor in money, poor in health, poor in spirit, then you are blessed because yours is the kingdom of heaven. If that day is a day of mourning and grief, you are blessed, because you will know God's comfort. If you are meek and humble as God is meek and humble, you are blessed, because you will inherit the earth. If you hunger or thirst after what is right in your relationship with God, you are blessed, because God will fill you. Those who

give their lives to God in being merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and are persecuted because you are not little boys or girls of this world any longer but men and women strong in your relationship with God, you are blessed and great will be your reward not on this earth but in heaven...for the same way the little boys of the earth persecuted the mature prophets that came before you."

In life we are measured every day, what we wear, what we drive, how we speak, how we act, if we are late to work or early, old or young, what color hair we have or if we have hair at all...even in church we judge and measure. We have been conditioned and programmed by society since the day we were born to measure ourselves and compared ourselves to others and strive to be on top.

Speaking as a male, little boys love to get all the marbles, all the toys, all the power and popularity, everything we can in order to be the King of the Hill. But one day God calls us to grow up, and more often than not, it is a day that we will never forget: a funeral, a heart attack, cancer, or someone persecutes us and utters all kinds of evil things against us, or something that causes us to realize that all that we think is important is in fact meaningless.

We question what is the true measure of a man or a woman. We question what is really important in life if everything is stripped away from us. We love movies like "Castaway" with Tom Hanks because he is stranded on a desert island with nothing left in his life, not even time is important anymore, and he is transformed...but most of us are still little boys or

girls and we leave the cinema thanking our lucky stars that we never have to go through something like that in life. But anyone who has even gone through a crisis in life knows that we all will find ourselves on that desert island wondering what is it that I can give to get out of this mess?

But the scriptures say today that God is not concerned with the measurements of success or failure of the world's standards...God's standard of measure is paramount: How strong is your relationship with God?

I'd like to end with this quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer written in his famous book, The Cost of Discipleship: "Having reached the end of the Beatitudes, we naturally ask if there is any place on this earth for the community which they describe. Clearly, there is one place, and only one, and that

is where the Poorest, Meekest, and most sorely Tried of all men is to be found—on the cross at Golgotha. The community that is the subject of the Beatitudes is the community of the crucified. With Him it has lost all, and with him it has found all.” St. Paul in Corinthians that we read today said it best: "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." It is Jesus who is the example of a strong relationship with God. This Jesus who was considered nothing by the religious leaders, nothing in political power, nothing in money, nothing in looks and popularity because of his charisma and speech making ability, who died a traitor's death on a cross even though he was innocent, this Jesus was EVERYTHING! He had it all because of his relationship with God, and that's why mature

people followed him. These people had nothing either, some didn't even have their health, and that gave these men and women insight into the Messiah that all of the little boys and girls of the world couldn't see...that a strong relationship with God is what sets you apart, being like Jesus Christ is what is important, and He is the answer to all our questions! That is why we are here today as a community of the crucified, to learn about showing others that maturity is not about age or wisdom of this world, but that we follow Jesus, the One who shows us how to live in the Kingdom of God through a strong relationship with Him. Amen.