

Priceless

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Although we're not even two months into the new calendar year, we are, at this point, right about mid way through the church year. And indeed, the next four and half months or so will pass before we know it. The end or even mid-point of church years, like many of the markers of time we purposely observe or just happen to notice throughout our lives, always seems to me to come with invitation to pause. To stop and reflect and think about what I have to show for it, professionally...and vocationally, that is, as it relates to my calling. And of course, to pause, reflect, and think about what we as a congregation have to show for our time together.

As it happens, even now, at the half way point, we have a lot to show for it, although it may not always be readily apparent depending on where we look and how we measure the value of our efforts. Culturally, in the US, anyway, we're conditioned to focus on goals and results and any and all supporting hard data. These, the reasoning goes, will not only reveal what we've done, but how efficiently we did whatever we've done, which is also seen as key to whether or not we were successful. This approach is neither right or wrong, it is simply a way of measuring value. One that emphasizes that which Gary Kowalski might characterize as "solidity."

I was reminded of how strongly biased toward solidity we are in measuring the value of all kinds of things as a young man engaged me some years ago in a conversation about antiques, particularly the appraisal of antiques, which happens to be my previous career. Initially this young man insisted that appraisals were little more than subjective opinions that rested largely on the credibility and influence of the appraiser. [For the record, appraisers are not that powerful in the marketplace].

Perhaps he got that idea watching the popular Antiques Roadshow whose appraisers have become something of minor celebrities due to their appearance on the show leading some to believe that their valuations carry a weight greater than that of other equally qualified but less "famous" appraisers.

Nonetheless, I shared with him the fact that appraisers, even those who appear on TV and seem to apply a dollar value to all kinds of things without great effort, actually rely on careful analysis of sales data and market trends for comparable objects to estimate value. Then they consider factors such as rarity, and provenance (an object's ownership history) that may increase or decrease an object's appeal and thus its value. Both of which is also often discernible in sales data. Still, what an appraiser cannot easily measure, and why appraisals sometime seem a merely subjective opinion, are those often ineffable but clearly impactful qualities that move a person to pay more, sometimes significantly more, for one of two otherwise apparently identical objects. At which point the young man shifted to question as to why antiques or original art should have any value at all beyond the function of their form.

By his reasoning an antique or original should have no more value than a reproduction since, to him, the function of each, whether new or old, was identical. Factors, such as the object's conception, aesthetics, creation, workmanship, history, shouldn't matter, he claimed. To him these are all part of an object's past, a past that did not belong to any future owner, except perhaps in their own mind. All that mattered about an object to him was that it served its observable purpose, its apparent usefulness. In other words, its "solidity."

Now, I admit I was saddened listening to this young man's perspective. Never mind the fact that antiques are often a viable green option in a world increasingly crowded by overproduction. Or that many antiques are actually cheaper than similar new products. But what saddened me more was he presented and defended his perspective as an insistence on the necessity and superiority of reason...or rules...to use his word, concerning the assignment of value to things. Indeed, he seemed only able to ascribe value to those things or qualities he could see and measure concretely. A perspective, which for many, is not limited to their view of things like antiques and which reminded me of the paleontologist, as described by Gary Kowalski, "Who may claim to teach us the history of life (but) all they can really offer is a chronicle of the lifeless features that once vital beings left behind."

Which brings me back to reflecting on the church year now about half passed and the question of what I...what we have to show for it. The "fossil" record, if you will, can be read for years to come in the form of the committee and team minutes, the minister's and treasurer's reports and the Board minutes. Information that will be further distilled and summarized for inclusion in the annual report at the end of the church year. Now, I do not mean to suggest these are not important. And indeed, if we were a business as some wryly

suggest churches are, solidity, as expressed in these reports might be all that would be needed to satisfy shareholders, so long as it was good news.

But church is in fact not a business. Its central task is not to please shareholders, but as my colleague Mark Morrison-Reed has written, “to unveil the bonds that bind each to all.” Which is to say, to focus on whose we are before what we do, recognizing that while solidity is not unimportant, it is as Kowalski notes, “for dry bones and other desiccated remnants.”

Indeed, a vibrant religious community looks beyond the “lingering impressions”, those remains clinging to the surface of things year after year to assess the value of its efforts toward what Mark Morrison-Reed describes as, “a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives others.” In doing so the bonds which bind each to all are unveiled, not as something solid inviting our observation, but as something felt inviting our engagement. Something beautifully alluded to when I hear people talk of the “positive energy” they feel here or of SUUS being welcoming.

To a world that prizes solidity, seeking and finding value only in that which can be seen, held, or recorded, we gather to remind ourselves and our world, as Kowalski notes, “Whatever has the capacity to move and grow and stir the soul will remain unobserved and ineffable.” Like the “It” from our opening hymn, “which sounds along the ages” unveiling our interconnectedness or the “gift of nothing” Mooch gives Earl in our story for all ages.

It is an appreciation of this truth, that there is more than what is easily observed, that gives an object, like an antique, value beyond its usefulness and a person’s or community’s efforts value beyond their tangible accomplishments. Which is to say, the actual living of our lives matters as much as whatever “hard parts” are preserved after our day, week, month, year or life has ended.

In Walden, Henry David Thoreau famously wrote of his desire to live deliberately, with purpose and meaning, so that at the time of his death he would not discover he had not really lived. For Thoreau, purpose and meaning was discerned through attention to that which moves, grows and stirs the soul rather than perfect alignment with any superficial or potentially self-serving purpose and meaning prescribed by others or society.

And when all is said and done...that is what the church, at its best, supports in each of us individually and as a community. The opportunity to live deliberately. Connected in love rather than fettered by fear to one another.

Attuned to the unobserved and ineffable, that which moves, grows and stirs us. So even as whatever may make a given year “interesting”, as Gary Kowalski might say, fades away, we will be sustained knowing that what we have to show for our time here is infinitely deeper and more valuable than the observable fossil record clinging to the surface. Indeed, some might even deem it priceless.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be