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What God Cherishes

Psalm 8:4

In the 16th chapter of John Jesus is continuing his farewell address to his disciples. This is a passage that is very appropriate for this Baccalaureate Sunday because it is in essence a commencement address. The disciples will soon begin a new chapter in their lives in the aftermath of Jesus' death. They will have to come to terms with the crisis of losing their teacher. At the heart of that crisis is dealing with a world that does not comprehend the significance of their faith. But the gospel writer recognizes that the disciples are not the only ones who have to deal with such a world. This is our burden as well.

The conflict between the gospel of Christ and the values of the world is at the heart of Jesus' trial before the Roman authorities. It is never clear in the gospel narratives exactly what Jesus is convicted of before he is put to death. Charges of treason and blasphemy are directed at Jesus, but no real evidence is offered. It is as if these charges were being hurled at Jesus to see if anything would stick. In the end his conviction on trumped up charges suggests something more profound than treason or blasphemy. He is branded a loser and is dispatched out of this world as a person of no significance. John's gospel is addressed to people who are being judged in a similar way. If we are not rich enough, or powerful enough, or smart enough, or sexy enough we live under the indictment of a success worshipping culture. That is one of the first lessons our graduates will learn if they haven't learned it already.

To those who must contend with a culture which defines them as losers, Jesus makes a very important promise in the 16th chapter of John. He declares that the Holy Spirit will guide us into the truth. The Spirit will provide us with new eyes by which we can see beyond the destructive categories of our culture. The Spirit makes it possible for us to see what God cherishes.

John wants his readers to see the truth that is affirmed in Psalm 8. The poetry of the psalm celebrates the Creator whose glory exceeds the heavens. This creator has chosen to be mindful of people like us without regard for the categories by which we are designated winners and losers. The Psalmist believes that God's decision to cherish every human being is as remarkable as creation itself. We have all seen this attitude of mindfulness demonstrated by dedicated spouses, parents, and friends. But that God should choose to cherish us in the same way is truly surprising. The psalmist knows very well that human beings are not always impressive or lovable. The Psalmist says to God, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them (Psalm 8:4)?" God's choice to care for the whole human family is beyond our capacity to understand.

This, of course, was Jesus' attitude toward everyone he met. Jesus always paid attention to the losers of his society. He noticed those who were forgotten. He cherished those who were despised. Even on the cross Jesus was mindful of the thief beside him and offered him the gracious word of life. In this way Jesus not only demonstrated the mindfulness of God but also taught the disciples to follow his lead by caring for those around them.

In his book *About Alice*, Calvin Trillan describes an experience his wife Alice had while volunteering at a camp for terminally ill children.

Alice befriended a young girl, 'a magical child who was severely disabled,' whom she remembered simply as 'L.' L was courageous and optimistic. One day while L was absorbed in a game of Duck, Duck, Goose, Alice spotted a letter that L's parents had written her. She could not resist reading the first few lines: 'If God had given us all the children in the world to choose from, L, we would have chosen you.' Alice passed the note to a fellow counselor, whispering breathlessly, 'Quick. Read this. It's the secret of life (Quoted by Marks Ralls, *Christian Century*, May 15, 2007, page 17).'

If there is a secret of life, it has nothing to do with having money and power or being smart and sexy. It has everything to do with the Creator who cherishes every human being and calls us to do the same.