

Toward the Peaceful One: **THE WORTH OF ALL PERSONS**

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As a prophetic church we seek to uphold and restore the Worth of All Persons individually and in the community, challenging unjust systems that diminish human worth.

For many HIV positive women—especially minorities—unjust systems and social marginalization prevent them from being respected and cared for as creations of God. They are mistreated.

When I (Robyn) was working on my master's degree, I joined a research team. It sought to reduce racial and gender disparity in HIV-positive minority women. The idea was to find ways to challenge oppressive structural and social systems. Our research data helped identify actions that increased self-esteem and strengthened community support systems in this vulnerable population.

As the primary interviewer, I got to know women in the study. I learned about their desires, their fears, and what they believed their future could hold as minority females living with HIV. I remember one woman we'll call Deborah. She had been living with HIV for five years. She was raised by a single mother. At 18, upon graduating from high school, she looked forward to a life of hope, love, and prosperity. She felt she checked all the boxes for starting a successful path. She had a job, was living on her own, and was saving money to start community college.

But life changed after meeting a man we'll call Jacob. She found herself caught between cycles of beatings and reconciliation. Desperate for love, something she never was convinced she deserved, she stayed in the abusive relationship, waiting for the caring man she fell in love with to reemerge.

They had three children. She lost her job and had to spend the money she had saved for community college to support her new family. During her third pregnancy her doctor told her she was HIV positive. She learned the transmission was through Jacob, who

disappeared from her and their children's lives.

Deborah talked about being devastated because she couldn't break the cycle of her youth: poverty, raising three children in a single-parent home—compounded by living with HIV. She spoke of difficulty in navigating a health-care system with a heavily stigmatized pre-existing medical condition and without steady employment or health insurance.

I cringed as I transcribed words that demeaned her self-worth and showed how she believed she never could break the cycle. "There is no future for me," she would often say.

But she persevered in the program, going to great lengths to come to our many seminars and meetings, even without a car or reliable child-care options. Deborah, like many women in the study, sought ways to better her future.

We held seminars that focused on life skills such as financial management, community resources, and healthy health-care behaviors. Among the most important aspects was providing a safe place for women with HIV to share, showing they were not alone. For the first time in many interviews, I heard Deborah express a vision for her future, how she would provide for her children as a single parent. She became more engaged, often mentoring other women.

After the first batch of seminars, she started talking about how she didn't deserve Jacob's physical and emotional abuse, and that what he did was wrong.

I did not need to be shown the data; I knew by interviews with Deborah and other women that our research team's hypothesis was correct: Interventions that increased self-esteem and provided community support produced better outcomes. God views all people as having inestimable and equal worth. Stories like Deborah's demonstrate that addressing the wholeness of body, mind, spirit, and relationships shows the oppressed they have worth, that there is Worth of All Persons.

WORTH OF ALL PERSONS

This important value is one of our nine Enduring Principles. Fundamentally, we define it as “God views all people as having inestimable and equal worth.” We consider this a key value of who we are. It is part of our essence. We commit to upholding the mistreated in our world and restoring them from “unjust systems that diminish human worth” to human dignity.

It is, as Bosnian theologian Miroslav Volf argues, the will to embrace: “to give ourselves to others and ‘welcome’ them, to readjust our identities to make space for them.” Through this lens we profess our Christian discipleship and prophetically oppose society maladies such as racism and domestic violence.

IMAGE OF GOD

Another key lens for dealing with issues related to mistreatment is that of *imago Dei*. This Latin term means image of God. The concept comes from the creation story. Genesis 1:26–28 NRSV states: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind our image...so God created humankind in his image.’” Other verses, such as Genesis 9:6, reemphasize that humanity is created in God’s image. They’ve all had a powerful influence over the church.

Although Biblical scholars and theologians have interpreted the concept differently over the years, today we look at this concept as a role for humanity—as partners of God to “image” divine nature. We reflect God as a mirror. Our Community of Christ theologian, Anthony Chvala-Smith, shares in his excellent book, *A Way of Life: Understanding Our Christian Faith*:

We are created to “image” the Living God—to reflect divine glory and live God’s just and compassionate purposes. In other words, humanity is to be God’s mirror in the world. This is a signal honor.

If we diminish people—or allow others or systems to mistreat, we are making, as Christian activist Jim Wallis says, “a brutal assault on the image of God.”

The principle of *imago Dei* calls us to oppose adamantly the mistreatment of others. Fundamentally, it calls us to live in healthy relationships. Doctrine and Covenants 163:2b reminds us of that important point:

The restoring of persons to healthy or righteous relationships with God, others, themselves, and the earth is at the heart of the purpose of your journey as a people of faith.

OTHERNESS

Those who mistreat often fear “the other.” As a faith community, we recognize the importance of diversity—it is beautiful. Our Enduring Principle of Unity in Diversity acknowledges that we are a “diverse, international family of disciples, seekers, and congregations.” We embrace the diverse and unifying nature of the Holy Spirit. We are called to invite all to God’s table, not to make others the same as us, but to be a community enhanced by others in furthering the reign of God.

Diversity of talent, thought, nature, language, and culture enriches society. This otherness blesses us. We should never suppress “the other.” Rather we must welcome and demonstrate hospitality.

However, influences in our world desire to dehumanize or demonize “the other.” They intentionally engender and instill fear. If people are not seen as human or are viewed as substandard, it is much easier to mistreat and abuse them. As Matt Frizzell reminded us in the introductory article in this series (“Toward the Peaceful One,” May-June 2020 Herald): “Following Jesus today means discerning Christian voices, some of which aren’t of God.”

Anytime we hear or read of a perspective that dehumanizes or demeans, we must recognize it as being contrary to God’s desires for creation. In fact, dehumanization often leads to the mistreatment of others. Matt reminded us that Doctrine and Covenants 163:3c offers counsel:

There are subtle, yet powerful, influences in the world, some even claiming to represent Christ, that seek to divide people and nations to accomplish their destructive aims. That which seeks to harden one human heart against another by constructing walls of fear and prejudice is not of God.

CONFESSION

As we move toward the peaceful One by professing that God weeps for “the mistreated,” we acknowledge another truth about ourselves: We admit our complicity. We confess:

- Mistreatment comes in many forms and often in subtle ways.
- At times, we mistreat in our families, our workspaces, and our relationships.
- Our silence and non-action contribute to mistreatment.
- Our own implicit bias (unconscious attitudes and stereotypes) blinds us from seeing clearly our ignorance, prejudice, and fear of others.
- We fall prey to subtle political, economic, and social influences and structures that create fear and engage in mistreatment.

However, we also share freely the truths we know about God. In other words, we profess God's love, grace, and reconciliation.

- Jesus Christ demonstrated self-giving love. We are to mirror that trait. "...be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord, and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interest, but to interests of others" (Philippians 2:2-4 NRSV).
- Jesus Christ's central teaching was the reign of God. We are called to proclaim and live into Zion, the peaceable reign. "He has told you, O mortal what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8 NRSV).
- Jesus Christ prophetically challenged the leaders of his day. We are called to "strive to be faithful to Christ's vision of the peaceable Kingdom of God on earth. Courageously challenge, cultural, political, and religious trends that are contrary to the reconciling and restoring purposes of God. Pursue Peace" (Doctrine and Covenants 163:3b).

OUR CHALLENGE

We all can agree that people are mistreated throughout our world. We need only to look closely in our lives, read the newspaper, listen to the daily news, or check the Internet. Mistreatment rears its ugly head in every facet of our lives—in our families, schools, workspaces, communities, cities, societies, and nations.

Our community is called to model the Worth of All Persons and reflect God's love and grace to

our world. We are to respect "the others" and invite them to enrich us as we live into the reign of God. We must confess and acknowledge our complicity in the influences that divide and harden hearts. May we be attentive to our own fears and ignorance. May we lay bare our implicit and unconscious biases, which prevent us from seeing the world clearly and contribute to mistreatment. Lastly, may we repudiate theological, economic, political, and social distortions that demonize and demean.

As we reflect on Deborah, who felt degraded, hopeless, and uncertain as to whether she could break the cycle of "there is no future for me," we hope that each of us—individually and in community—will prophetically challenge those influences that mistreat. Let us pray that we demonstrate the will to embrace "the other" so all may flourish in God's creation. Shalom to each of you.



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