

A few years ago, I read a fiction book that I've remembered ever since. It is called the Longest Ride and a movie was later made from it. The plot is quite complex, but the part of it that is relevant to the message today goes like this:

An old man named Ira dies but as he is dying he begs a couple, Luke and Sophie to save a box of love letters he has written to his wife, Ruth. Many of the letters were written long after Ruth has died and Sophie and Luke read them. A while later Sophie and Luke read that the man's estate is auctioning off Ruth and Ira's art collection and they decide to go because they were intrigued by this man and his love for his wife.

The art collection contains multimillion dollar paintings by artists like Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock. Wealthy art collectors and museums are all gathered to bid on these paintings.

The first painting presented, however, is a crudely painted amateurish portrait of Ruth. None of the wealthy collectors bids on this painting; in fact, they shout rude comments about wanting to hurry to get to the good stuff. Sophie, however, is entranced with the painting because she it represents the great love she has read about in Ira's letters. Luke buys the painting for her for a very small amount of money to please her.

As it turns out, this was the only painting Ira valued. He had provided in his will that whoever bought that first

painting would own the entire collection for the cost of that painting. So for about \$100 Luke, who had only had about \$101 to his name, now owns a multimillion dollar art collection. The most valuable painting in the collection, then, had been the one that seemed to have little value at all. Luke had gained everything because he chose to give all he had to acquire it and to please the woman he loved.

It's easy for us to judge value by how something appears. We often place more value on someone who is dressed well and speaks well than someone who can hardly say an intelligent sentence and wears funny clothes. Or someone who we perceive as of a lesser station than us.

Think about it. We're at a cocktail party and we see a vivacious beautiful person and a solemn homely one. Which one do we choose to talk to?

Or, more to the point, both of these people visit our church. Which one do we race to help find a seat and run to talk to at coffee hour?

Judging value based on appearance is always a dubious exercise. For Christians, it's a sin – we fall short of the mark when we judge by appearances, especially when that means we tend to treat or love someone better based on that experience.

We are called to love our neighbor as ourselves and everyone is our neighbor. We don't get to decide that we love or serve the beautiful, wealthy people better than the homely, poor ones. Of course, we don't get to decide to

love only the homely ones either and that's where the connection between our calling as Christians and the action of the characters in the Longest Ride breaks down. The beautiful people are God's children too. The point is that we love and help all people. Favoritism lacks a place in Christian living. We don't rush through our tasks with the homely and less interesting people to get on to the real fun with those we perceive as having more value. We don't make judgments based only on what we quickly see about a person.

Basically, we interact with people out of agape love, which allows us to love each other and bear one another's burdens in all circumstances. We love not only those who are part of our in-crowd or those like us but everyone. We realize that God's image is in the face of the poor and the rich, the beautiful and the homely, those with infirmities, and those who seem healthy.

When we fail to love and value people without partiality, we fall short of Christians. We also often miss out on something that could enrich our own lives. Because God is in all people, we are missing out on God in those people we ignore. We miss out on what these people might teach us, and we miss out on getting to know them as people.

The Gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ – shows no partiality. God is in all people, and Jesus came to save all people. We are called as Christians to value all people equally and to love them as our neighbors. No matter

whether they look or act lovable or not, we are called to love everyone.