

First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Making Sure that what Really Matters, Really Matters”

Psalm 126
Philippians 3:4b – 14

March 13, 2016

You know, it’s really amazing how many different things can rise to the level of “really mattering” to us. Depending on what we’ve got going on and what we happen to be dealing with at a given time, any number of things can “really matter” in our life.

For example, when I was making hotel reservations for our October vacation to Maine, it really mattered to me that we got an ocean-view room at the Bar Harbor Inn. I didn’t want no stinkin’ room with a view of the parking lot; I wanted a room with a view of the ocean! This was important; it “really mattered;” and so we wound up changing the dates of our vacation just to make sure that we got the room that we wanted!

And when I played golf at Shinnecock Hills last September, it really mattered that I count every last stroke that I took during the round, so I’d know my actual, honest-to-goodness, no stinking mulligans score... even if that score wound up looking like one of our New York area codes. This was important to me; it “really mattered;” and so I told the guys I was playing with not to give me any breaks, and to hold me to my actual score. Which lasted until my first shot, on the first hole; which traveled about fifty feet and landed in the middle of an impossibly dense patch of 18 inch long grass. And when Wayne Bruyn said, “Hit another one, Rick,” I said, “Well, okay!” And from that point on, what “really mattered” was having fun and not worrying about my stinkin’ score!

And it can really matter to us that our favorite sports team wins the big game, or defeats the hated rival; and it can really matter to us that we live in a certain kind of house, in a certain kind of neighborhood; and it can really matter that we get the promotion, or make the team, or earn a good grade, or meet the famous celebrity, and on, and on, it goes. And I haven’t even mentioned our health really mattering, or the wellbeing of our kids and grandkids really mattering, or who wins the election really mattering.

The list can change from week to week, and from year to year; but, no matter what’s *on* that list at any given time, a lot of our time and energy is consumed in the effort to take care of the things that we believe really, *really* matter. And that makes sense; and I think that we should make it a priority to tend to the things that really *do* matter: to our lives, to our families, to our future, to our world, and, of course, to our Christian faith.

The problem is that, as I mentioned before, sometimes it’s not so easy to figure out what it is in our lives that’s supposed to really matter... in a lasting, significant, life-changing way. I mean, nobody would say that having a certain hotel room *really* matters, within the big picture of our lives. And very few people would say that their love for some sports team *matters* so much that life is hardly worth living apart from winning the championship.

Our circumstances change; our priorities get rearranged; what mattered more than anything yesterday, may not matter at all tomorrow. What can we do to make sure that what really matters,

really matters... as we make our way through life? Well, there's not much that we can do about the changing circumstances and varying priorities of our workaday existence. We just have to do our best to stay on top of that, and try to keep everything in proper perspective. But we absolutely *can* put forth the effort to make sure that our relationship with Jesus Christ, and the life of discipleship to which He calls us, always matter... and I mean, *really* matter; no matter what else might be going on in our lives.

That was the point which Paul the Apostle was making in our lesson this morning from his letter to the Philippians. And his words are worth taking to heart, as we face the sometimes harrowing challenge of living as faithful Christians, in a world that never stops inviting our allegiance to things that really *don't* matter all that much.

In the section of the letter that we read together today, Paul is emphasizing to his Philippian friends that none of his worldly accomplishments, none of his achievements "in the flesh" as it were, really mattered very much in comparison to the new life which he had found in Jesus Christ. And please understand: Paul isn't saying that all the honors and distinctions of his prior life didn't matter *at all*; certainly they did. His point is simply that, when seen in the light of the gospel message of grace and hope which had come to him in Christ... they mattered a whole lot *less* than they once did, back when they were the source of all-important significance to him.

The fact of the matter is that Paul actually had been a person of very high rank, and class, and distinction. He wasn't just making it up, and he wasn't just boasting: from the point of view of his community, his culture, his world, he truly did have a lot going for him that everyone thought really, *really* mattered. And the reason why Paul's status and distinctions mattered so much is because everyone thought that, by attaining such a high level of accomplishment, he must have had a truly great relationship with God.

Almighty God, it was believed, would look upon the highly decorated Paul, and say, "*This guy is great! This dude is okay by me! He's passed all the tests, he's met all the standards, he's jumped through all the hopes, and now, by gum, I'm gonna bless him and give him a special place in heaven!*" That's what all of his peers thought about Paul; and that's what Paul thought about himself... back in his pre-Christian days. And in our text he runs down the list of his honors and achievements, all the things which, for him, at that earlier time in his life, really mattered.

And so, he tells the Philippians:

"If anyone thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh (if anyone thinks that his or her worldly status is so great that God's just gotta love them), I have more:

*"Circumcised on the eighth day (in accordance with the Law of Moses), of the people of Israel (I'm one of God's chosen people, people!), of the tribe of Benjamin (the tribe that produced Israel's very first king, King Saul... my original namesake!), a Hebrew of Hebrews (not some watered-down, Hellenized, Greek-oriented semi-Jew, but a dyed-in-the-wool Hebrew-speaking, Hebrew-thinking, super-Jew!), in regard to the law, a Pharisee (I obeyed God's law more meticulously than anybody else! My whole *life* was dedicated to making sure that I didn't break any of God's laws, *ever!*), as for zeal, persecuting the church (you all know that, in my earlier life, I tried to stamp out the Jesus people, which made me even more popular with my Pharisaic friends and colleagues), as for legalistic righteousness, faultless..."*

In other words, Paul is saying, "at one time in my life, I was 'all that...' I was the bee's knees, the cat's pajamas, the biggest man on God's campus that you were ever going to see! I spent

my life proving that I, Paul, could do it all... and that I was worthy, worthy, worthy of the best that God had to offer! *“That’s what really mattered to me! Until,”* Paul then tells the Philippians, “until I ran into Jesus, out on the road to Damascus; and discovered a whole new definition of what really, truly matters.”

And Paul goes on to say:

“Whatever was to my profit (my whole old set of Pharisaic attitudes and priorities) I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

“I consider them rubbish (trash, garbage, dung, in fact) that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

You see, Paul’s entire way of thinking about what “really matters” got flipped on its head... when he dedicated his life to Jesus. From that point forward, it was no longer about what he, Paul, could do... it was about what Jesus could do for him. It was no longer about how great he, Paul, was... it was about how great God is. It was no longer about Paul *deserving* grace and forgiveness and hope... it was about the Lord graciously giving to Paul the grace, forgiveness, and hope that he could *never*, ever, even begin to “deserve.”

For Paul the Christian Apostle, what really mattered was doing his best to imitate the life of Christ in his own life... even to the point of sharing in the suffering of Christ; not in some foolish, masochistic, self-destructive sort of way, but by willingly bearing in his own body the hatred and abuse which is sometimes vented by people who don’t want to hear the message of the gospel.

Paul is saying, “That’s what the Christian life is all about. Not earning distinctions and growing in worldly stature; but humbly following in the footsteps of Jesus, wherever they may lead. That’s what really matters; and that’s what a truly victorious life of Christian faith really looks like.”

Which brings us back to this morning, and our own life of faith and discipleship... and our own quest to make sure that, for us, what really matters, really matters. Of course, no one is saying that it doesn’t matter if we’re respected in the community, or well thought of in our work place, or take good care of our families. Certainly there are many things that “matter” in our day to day life... and we are right to give those things the time and attention which they deserve.

But I do think that Paul’s words to the Philippians are an invitation to us to take a step back, do a little personal introspection, and consider if everything that we believe “really matters,” actually does “really matter” as much as we think it does. Do we sometimes treat trivial issues as if they possessed life-or-death significance? Are we sometimes distracted from tending to more important matters, because we’re overly consumed by superficial concerns? Do we sometimes worry too much about our image, our status in the eyes of the community, instead of doing what’s right... even if what’s right may not be too popular?

And more to the point of our Christian discipleship, do we sometimes allow the never-ending chorus of worldly concerns to push our Christian discipline to the margins and back-burners of our life? Do we sometimes find ourselves with time to do all the things we really want to do... while rarely having time for prayer, or Bible study, or serious self-examination of the depth and quality of our faith? Do we sometimes, without consciously meaning to do so, treat our life with Christ as if it were just one more thing we do; instead of like the priceless treasure that makes all the other things we do, worth doing in the first place?

These are fair questions, because anymore we're so constantly bombarded with endless false alternatives to add to our "really matters" lists... that sometimes we lose track altogether of what it is that really *does* matter; and we wind up spinning our wheels in pursuit of stuff that may seem important on the surface, but which, at the end of the day, is nothing but a self-deluding distraction. And I know that every last one of us here today want our faith to be a whole heck of a lot more than that! And it can be, and it will be... but, as with Paul, it's got to matter to us, really matter to us, more than anything else in the world.

As we make our way through these final two weeks of Lent, let's make a special effort to think about what "really matters" in our life. Let's have the courage to do some honest self-evaluation, and if, for one reason or another, our life with the Lord has slipped a little bit on our list of what really matters... let's use this time to move it back up there where it belongs.

And we will be blessed; and we will be encouraged; and we, like Paul, we truly know the power of Christ's resurrection! That's our Lord's promise to us; and that's our conviction as His faithful people.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!