

Lives That Matter

sermon digest

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Galatians 1:1-8, 11-12

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Twelve years ago the Woman's Missionary Union of the Southern Baptist Convention contacted me, asking me to work twelve Bible studies I had done a few years earlier on women of the Bible into a book. We were approaching the year 2000, and it was an opportunity to look at the changing ministry of women and ask how that would play out in the new millennium. As I struggled with a title for the book, the first part came easily: *Women of Faith*. Coming up with a subtitle that would capture the essence of the book was more difficult. I finally settled on the words *Living Lives That Matter*, which seemed to reflect something of what I knew was going on in the lives of women & I strongly suspect, men as well. How do we assess the value of our lives? I am not talking about the assessment that other people place on our lives, and I am not suggesting that our lives do not have inherent value. The question I am raising has to do with how we determine the goals and values that provide focus for our lives and become the measure by which we gauge our lives. I strongly suspected twelve years ago, as I strongly believe now, the most crucial existential challenge we confront in life is not the realization that our lives will come to an end, but the question that arises within us concerning the difference it has made that we have lived.

Getting ready to turn 65 this fall, I find myself asking the question again. As I look back over my life, what are the standards that count most as I seek to size it up? And given the strong faith commitment of my life, what kind of pointers to I find there to help me in the process of looking back as well as looking forward into the work and years yet to be?

Assuming that you struggle with those questions from time to time as well, I am inviting you this morning to reflect on them in light of the words and experiences of the Apostle Paul.

Christ is at the center. To put it bluntly, we find Paul pitching something of a hissy fit. He had come into the midst of this people preaching the gospel and they had responded. Confident of their faith, he had moved on, only to find a short time later that they had sold out to other evangelists, evangelists that offered them visible signs, living proof texts, you might say, that they were on the right track. Every other letter that he wrote to his churches begins with opening greetings and moves into thanksgiving and naming names of those faithfully carrying forward his good work. But not in his letter to the Galatians. Here he cites his credentials as an apostle and quickly moves to defend them. He was not, he reminds his readers sent "by human commission nor from human authorities." He was sent "through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead." Such credentials, he is saying, are no trifling matter. So listen up! He then breaks into a doxology to "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ . . . to whom be the glory forever and ever." And just as the Galatians are joining him in a hearty amen, he delivers his punch. Just at the point where in other letters he breaks into a "I thank my God every time I remember you," he gives voice to an utter sense of frustration. "I am astonished," he fumes, "that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel."

At this point, let me drop my playful tone. Although it may be a good attention getting device in approaching scripture, it won't do when dealing with the dead seriousness of the matter. Although Paul has often been discounted for seeming egotism, this is not one of those occasions. "Even if we (meaning Paul) or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!" The issue is not loyalty to Paul himself, but loyalty to the gospel. The issue is not the culture that surrounds them and the danger of their sliding back into their old ways and taking up licentious, worldly lifestyles. It is that they are buying into a perverted gospel—a gospel, Paul assures them, that is no gospel at all. The issue is not insistence that they "walk in lockstep and wear a theological uniform," as we say in our covenant. In his letter to the Corinthians and the Romans, Paul blesses diversity within the church and calls new Christians to join together across divisions that need not be barriers to fellowship. The issue is whether or not oneness in Christ is enough to sustain and guide them. Do they—do we—need a crutch that will in reality replace the centrality of Christ and become our token, our assurance of salvation?

A counterfeit gospel is no gospel at all. We often breathe a sigh of relief when we realize that the crutch, the substitute the alternative evangelists were touting was that of circumcision. That, we say to ourselves, is one we've settled. No issue there! Or if we think further, we reduce the issue to legalism versus freedom; and most of us in this room would agree: no issue there! "For freedom," Paul will later go on to sing, "Christ has set us free," and we gladly join him in the chorus. Many of us, having drunk the bitter dregs of legalism at some earlier point in our lives or at least having observed its contentious, life-sapping effect on those imbibing today, feel little temptation to take it up again. The issue, however, is broader than that and deeper than that.

The church and its members in every age must struggle with counterfeits that would claim the hearts and minds of believers. Fear of diversity is crippling, and trying to force one another into a rigid mold rips Christian fellowship asunder and renders us narrow, isolated and self-righteous. The Crusades and witch trials of Christian history are constant reminders of the danger of zealous ideologues, but history speaks as well of those points when faithfulness to Christ meant saying an absolute and immovable "no!" Martin Luther stood before the Diet of Worms as, in his own words, a "captive to the Word of God" and launched the Reformation. Karl Barth, Martin Niemoller, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other stalwarts of the church issued the Barmen Declaration in Hitler's Germany in 1934, proclaiming

“Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey,” and launched the Confessing Church that stood toe to toe with the compromised church of the Third Reich. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches denounced in 1982 the acceptance of racial apartheid by one of its member churches, the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa.

What is less obvious or at least what we tend to forget, is the contentious path that finally brought the church to speaking its prophetic word. The paths to each of these statements of courage were littered with repeated failed attempts to reach consensus, trashed drafts of earlier proclamations, and impassioned warnings that such brazen actions would split the fellowship of the church and damage the church’s power and influence in society. In retrospect, these stalwarts of faith acted with courage and insight and delivered the church from captivity to an alien gospel, a gospel more servant to the dictates of expediency than the gospel of Christ—a gospel, Paul would say, that was no gospel at all.

What is needed by faithful churches and Christians of every age is not so much the precision of retrospective vision that looks back and sees the footprints of faithfulness in the past, but churches and believers that can look at the present and the future and determine where faithfulness is leading today. What is needed now as then is the willingness to make the journey—the willingness to keep both feet firmly planted, one in an open-eyed assessment of the realities that surround us and one in the possibility of things as they could and should be. What is needed are those who are willing to do the hard and often discouraging work of moving from here to there.

We can talk about many seductive influences seeking to turn the gospel of Christ into a more accommodating, easy sell in our society. We’re aware of the gospel of prosperity that in its most brazen form trumpets God’s desire that we become wealthy, but we also need to be attentive to that gospel’s more subtle and prevalent manifestation in the church’s preoccupation with its own markers for success, measured in numbers, buildings, and social-political prestige. We are aware of the many issues that are raging within our society today, and we are prone to wanting to dissociate ourselves from its ugliness. Is it possible, however, that it is there in the midst of all of that division and enmity that our most critically important witness to the God we know in Christ is needed? I am not speaking here of a narrow sort of evangelism that simply induces people to take on the name of Christian. As a matter of fact, many of the divisions that are most raging have people who call themselves Christian right in the middle of them. Is it possible that our calling in Christ suggests that we should not protect ourselves by merely seeking to flee the scene but that we should commit ourselves to finding a way of responding to the conflict in a hopeful way?

Perhaps like me, you look back on the most important influences that have shaped your life and faith and recognize from very early on a sense of calling to take seriously and seek to alleviate the pain of the world in which we live. Like me, you may recognize the not so subtle temptation to judge the “success” of life by other standards—by buildings and numbers and the size of my church’s budget. Even more alluring is the temptation to say enough—we’ve done our part and deserve a rest. But then that thing called reality creeps back in and the enmity and want and need that surround us tugs at our sense of responsibility. Perhaps this is something of the cost of discipleship. An easier gospel would promise a few shortcuts, a few certainties to which we can point and claim victory so that we can hang up our hats. Perhaps the cost is just that, the willingness to live with the discomfort, the incompleteness of our works and a sense of calling into the new day.

Reflecting on the need to stay in the fray and work toward resolution of those issues that so tear at our hearts, writer, speaker, educator, Quaker Parker Palmer suggests that maybe the very discomfort itself is an indicator of our faithfulness.

The deeper our faith, the more doubt we must endure; the deeper our hope, the more prone we are to despair; the deeper our love, the more pain its loss will bring; these are a few of the paradoxes we must hold as human beings. If we refuse to hold them in hopes of living without doubt, despair, and pain, we also find ourselves living without faith, hope, and love”--Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 82.

If the cost of faithfulness, hope and love is the doubt, despair and pain that accompany their unfinished nature, I don’t know about you, but I will choose the pain, for any other gospel is no gospel at all.

Or, to put it in a more feisty way, try Bonaro Overstreet’s poem “Stubborn Ounces”—a poem he says is written for the benefit of “One Who Doubts the Worth of Doing Anything If You Can’t Do Everything”:

You say the little efforts that I make
will do no good: they never will prevail
to tip the hovering scale
where Justice hangs in balance.

I don’t think
I ever thought they would.
But I am prejudiced beyond debate
in favor of my right to choose which side
shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight.

