

9/10/23

Romans 13:8-14 & Matthew 18:15-20

“Fundamentally It’s About the Fundamentals”

Three professors at Yale Divinity School turned their popular class into a book that came highly recommended to me by trusted sources, so our church staff is reading the book, Life Worth Living: A Guide to What Matters Most. We take time during weekly staff meeting to bat around our answers to discussion questions posed at the end of each chapter.

The book, Life Worth Living is about “a fundamental, hard-to-articulate question.” Every chapter deals with, “The Question.” There are many ways to try to express The Question, such as:

- What matters most?
- What is a good life?
- What is the shape of flourishing life?
- What kind of life is worthy of our humanity?
- What is true life?
- What is right and true and good?

No one of these captures The Question completely. It’s always bigger than one specific way of asking it. “The Question is about worth, value, good and bad, meaning, purpose, final aims and ends, beauty, truth, justice, what we owe one another, what the world is and who we are and how we live.”¹ You know, simple, little topics like that—it’s a throw-away book. Just Kidding.

¹ Life Worth Living: A Guide to What Matters Most by Miroslav Volf, Matthew Croasmun, and Ryan McAnnally-Linz. Viking, Penguin Random House, LLC, 2023, p. xv

Chris, James, Jeanne & I are about 1/3 of the way through the book and we've been introduced to many fellow travelers who've wrestled with, "The Question" and pondered it in their era or century in which they were living. One of the women's book groups, Faith, Hope, and Coffee will be reading Life Worth Living starting this Fall so if you're interested in having conversations about "The Question" in a small group setting I know the women are happy to take in new members.

I was reminded of "The Question" as I was thinking about today's scripture passages. What The Question prompts and prods in discussion has something to do with the fundamentals of life. The passages that we heard read from Romans & Matthew force us to return to the fundamentals of our faith.

Recall the way in which the passage from Romans 13 that Nancy read begins, "owe no one anything, except to love one another." Here, the Apostle Paul tells the church in Rome and reminds us today that the way the law is fulfilled and the commandments are obeyed are summed up, in verses 9 – 10, "Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor."

This may prompt us to ask ourselves other big questions such as, what is Love? Or, What does love look like? Or, How best am I to love my neighbor as myself? The answer to these

questions takes us back to, “The Question” which then returns us to the fundamentals of our faith.

Humorously, when a question is asked in church the answer is almost always, what? Jesus! Exactly! In Romans 13:14 we are told to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” The response or answer to the big question in Romans, “What is love?” which leads us to, “The Question” as we wrestle with it in the book, Life Worth Living, is Jesus. No surprise there, but it becomes difficult when we try to figure out how it all works and how to put it into practice.

For example, how do we put on the Lord Jesus Christ? Literally, do not stray from his path, follow, wear, breathe in and out the breath of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. When you and I are looking for ways to answer “The Question” or when you and I are casting about trying to figure out what is good, right, true, honorable, pure, pleasing, and commendable, scripture has us return to that which is fundamental and foundational. Jesus.

Jesus shows us how to live. Jesus died on the cross for our sins. Jesus rose from the dead so that we might know amazing grace and what that looks like. There’s nothing we can do to earn that grace it is all free gift from our Lord. These are the fundamentals of faith—Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection which teach us and show us how to love.

As we wrestle with The Question as posed in, Life Worth Living we may feel as though our lives are insignificant. We start thinking to ourselves, “I’ve done nothing of note compared to all of

the people over the centuries who've been examples for how to live a meaningful life, a life of purpose, plan, and poise."

There's a chapter in Life Worth Living that deals with what's called, "the triple promise of long, healthy and happy" and that again got me thinking about the fundamentals. In that chapter The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Lincoln, and Lady Constance Lytton were lifted up as models who didn't seek after this triple promise of "long, healthy, happy lives" but rather sought other fundamental ways to answer, "The Question" for their lives. I would add Frederick Douglass to this list of people who didn't seek the "triple promise" for his life after Marcus reminded us about his prophetic voice last night at the Berger Lecture.

We may wonder if, "long, healthy, happy" lives are a relevant goal when answering The Question or when figuring out fundamentals. Turning again to the passages we heard this morning—in the Gospel reading we are reminded of a fundamental of faith, that we are highlighting and claiming for our Fall kick-off today. In Matthew 18:20 Jesus says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." He says this in the context of reconciling with a fellow church member, neighbor, or one with whom you may be quarreling.

All of ministry is done in community. Faithful fellowship in relationship with others and with the Lord requires that you and I be a part of a community. We can not be faithful and faith filled without a faith community.

Today we highlight this verse, this reality, this demand and need for community, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,” and sum it up using, “worship + 1.” Worship + 1 is our Fall theme at Potomac Presbyterian Church. Worship + 1 is a simple equation that takes into consideration Lord’s Day worship such as we are doing right now + 1 other activity = Life Worth Living and guides us to what matters most, and helps us answer, “The Question.”

I almost feel like I don’t need to finish the book by the divinity school scholars because The Question involves what’s being highlighted today here, “Worship + 1.”

Each one of us is challenged to claim a + 1. We certainly invite everyone back to worship. This is a rhythm that is as old as time and as important as breathing. Worship is one of the things that distinguishes us as human beings. We worship. The + 1 means that yes, we worship to express our humanity, to love God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit and to tap into that deeper rhythm that brings meaning and wholeness to our lives. But we also add at least one other activity, committee, small group, leadership position, service project, and so on, to our lives so that we can nurture our spirits and live in the community God intended for us to live in because as has been noted in Matthew 18:20, Jesus says, “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

+ 1 means saying yes when the nominating committee member gives you a call to see if you’ll pray about serving as an elder or deacon.

+ 1 means stepping out of your comfort zone and meeting on Zoom with Faith, Hope and Coffee, or in person with Faith, Hope and Lunch woman's book groups, or the men's book group, or the PASTCF Science and religion book group, or the Exodus Bible Study group so that you can share what you've read with others and not be embarrassed but trust that the community will listen and hold what you have to say as relevant.

+1 means joining one of the many Committees at Potomac Presbyterian Church that are the engine of this community and make it work. There's Worship, Education, Mission, Fellowship, Congregational Care, Endowment, Generosity, Finance, Property, Personnel Committees that are all active and eager for new people to join their ranks to bring fresh perspectives and ideas.

+1 means signing up to work in the giving garden, or to bring food for Manna, or to pack snack bags even today to help with real food insecurity in the lives of neighbors in Montgomery County.

+1 means going to youth group, confirmation class, and children's choir.

+ 1 means singing in the sanctuary choir to help it through this time of transition when we don't yet have a director of music and organist but will soon we pray.

+ 1 means leading an adult education class on a topic that is near and dear to your heart so that others may learn from you and get to know you because as we have heard over and over this morning. Jesus says, "for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Matthew 18:20.

+1 means signing up on the church website sign-up Genius to serve as a fellowship hour host, or liturgist, or usher/greeter because Jesus says in Matthew 18:20, "for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

For sixty years this community has been making meaning and recharging on the fuel of one another gathering for worship, fellowship, education, and serving in the community. We celebrate all that this community has done and continues to do while we ask ourselves the Question:

What does worship + 1 look like for me so that we may live a Life Worth Living and figure out what matters most? It boils down fundamentally to the fundamentals of loving God, loving neighbor and being reminded once again of Jesus' words, "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Pray about how worship + 1 will make an impact in your life and in the life of this community and beyond as you figure out your answer to "The Question." To God be the Glory! Amen

Let us stand and sing together hymn #63 The Lord is God