

What is Most Important in Life?

The Rev. Chris McAuliffe, 10/8/2023

A man named Siddhartha Gautama was a prince in South Asia over 2500 years ago and had it all by the world's standards. He lived a life of luxury- never having to work, eating delicacies, dressing in fine clothing, and enjoying each and every day. He even married a princess, and they were expecting their first child. Siddhartha had all the wealth, power, familial bliss, and fame that a person could ever want. Yet, it all quickly came crumbling down when he encountered three people while traveling through a nearby park.

The first was an elderly man who had lived a long life and was showing the wear and tear of his age. The second was a sick person, who was visibly ill. The third was a corpse of a man who had died and was rotting away. Having been sheltered his whole life, Siddhartha was shaken by these encounters and began to question all that he had ever thought and known. On the day his son was born, he returned to the park and found a wandering monk which made him realize he needed to leave his royal life behind. That very night, he departed- abandoning his wealth, power, fame, and family in order to pursue enlightenment and find the meaning of life.

You may have heard this narrative before, as it is the life story of the Buddha. He was a man who spent his life wandering and trying to discover what was most important in this life. His quest, discoveries, and teachings led to the founding of Buddhism, which is one of the largest world religions with around 470 million followers today.

I am referencing the Buddha because I believe we are asking that same question this morning that he and so many have had throughout history- What is Most Important in Life? The world that we inhabit often tells us that things like wealth, money, and power are the most important. Yet, the Buddha is a prime example of someone who had all of those things and preached that they were meaningless at the end of the day. They did not give him true purpose or meaning in life.

It is appropriate that the Life Worth Living book that Emily has referenced recently in sermons, and that one of our Women's book groups is reading, opens with this detailing of the life of Buddha. His story stands as a prime example for how we all struggle and strive to know what makes life worth living. It is my hope that through the Psalmist and Paul, we will remind ourselves of what is most important to us as Christians and take steps to realign our lives to what matters most.

But, before we do that, let us ground ourselves in this present moment. We have made it to October and are in the midst of the Fall season. The weather is getting colder, sunsets are coming earlier, and the leaves are already starting to change color and fall. Here at the church, we are living into our Worship +1 theme and seeking to make church and God a priority as we set our routines and intentions for this season. It has been wonderful to hear and see people getting more involved and excited about coming together as a community. We had a great

Windridge Vineyards gathering last Wednesday, our small groups are all up and running, and committees are hard at work planning for upcoming events like Potomac Day and the Fall Festival on October 21-22.

This morning, we have found our way here to the church, both in person and online, in order to worship our Lord and renew our spirits for the week ahead of us. The Good News is that we are answering a very simple question that we should easily be able to tackle every angle of in these next few minutes- What is Most Important in Life?

Or maybe not... The Buddha's story highlights how this is a very difficult, but very important question. We are all on our own unique journey as we answer this question and discover more about ourselves, the world, and God. People throughout time have asked this question and sought to find the answer. We know this because it was one of the primary things on the minds of the community of Philippi long ago.

In our passage that Nancy just read, we find Paul once again caught in crossfire between Jews and Gentiles arguing in the community. If you have studied Paul before, the same issues of circumcision, food laws, and following the Torah pop up in this community as it had in so many others. You see, Jews spent their lives and upbringings learning how to live according to the Law and the covenant that God had established with the people of Israel. This way of living was detailed to great extent in the Old Testament and followed to the T by the Jewish people. The Gentiles, on the other hand, were coming into the church from a polytheistic background and learning who God and Jesus were with fresh minds. Both the Jews and Gentiles lived very different spiritual lives and held very different beliefs and customs. Both groups were struggling with what was most important in their life and their faith as they founded this new church. In order to bring the community together, Paul appealed to both groups by centering in on what mattered most.

When you think about your life, what do you think matters most?

The jar exercise that I did with the kids earlier is something I came across last year when we used it in one of our Youth Group lessons. It helped us all think about how we spend our time and what that time spent might say about ourselves and our values. I find this exercise to be particularly powerful for students in the DC area, because everyone here seems to be so busy. Before coming to PPC, I was a youth pastor down in North Carolina and life just wasn't so hectic down there. When we planned events, it was easy to get all the kids together as each and every day wasn't filled with something. That is not the case here, as we all seem to be so busy, both students and adults.

I invite you to think for a moment about your life. If you were to do this jar exercise with your typical day, what would get the most beads? Take a few seconds to think about your top three time consumers in a day. (Wait 15 seconds)

Next, I invite you to think about how much time you give towards what matters most to you. For example, how full would your family jar, your rest jar, your fun jar, your spiritual jar be? (Wait 15 seconds)

Finally, what if someone were to just look at what you do in a typical day, what impression would they have of you? What values, beliefs, and ideas would they get from your jars and where your time goes? (Wait 15 seconds)

Thank you for taking that time. I believe we live in a world that constantly vies for our time and attention. It is so easy to get stuck in a habit of busyness and forget what is most important to us. If our jars don't align with what we hold as most important, maybe there is an opportunity to start filling back up those things that are most life giving. Or, if you find yourself feeling like your jars are all out of whack, know that you are not alone. When the community in Philippi went astray, they needed Paul to call them back to what mattered most.

In the midst of these debates and conflicts between Jews and Gentiles, Paul recentered the church by reminding them that Christ is their center. Though Paul was Jewish and followed all the customs and laws that came with it, they did not stand above Jesus or take importance over Jesus. Christ was so essential to Paul that he even placed him above his own life and interests. **In verse 8, Paul remarked that, “[Paul] regard[s] everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”** Put another way, everything Paul once held dear, lived by, and valued paled in comparison to Jesus. For Paul, Jesus was more important than anything and came first.

It may not come as a surprise that the answer to what is most important in life for us as Christians is Jesus, seeing as that always seems to be the correct answer in church. Yet, how much do our own lives reflect this? If we were to do that same jar exercise with different aspects of our life would they all show Jesus in some way? Would it be the same if we looked at the jars of how we spend our money? With what consumes our minds throughout the day? With how we interacted with other people, especially those who are different from us or we are at odds with? What jars have we allowed to take precedence over Christ? **SCRIPTURE SLIDE**

As I was pondering these questions this week, I was reminded of two youth leaders that I had growing up in middle school who modeled what placing Christ first looks like for me. Their names were Dawn and Drew and they were a young married couple who were very passionate about the church and youth group. I had heard about them and met them a few times because my older brother Brad was very active in the group. When I became a sixth grader and moved up to officially join them, but for some reason they were no longer there. Instead, Dawn and Drew felt called to serve in a different capacity. Though they both had stable careers, they dropped everything to move to Mexico in order to run an orphanage that our church was partnering with. It was not very well funded and the future was uncertain, but they answered God's call and left their comfortable San Diego lives. We had the joy of visiting them and helping them rebuild when I was in youth group and I remember being so in awe of their

decision to drop everything and follow God's call. There were days when they would go without eating to provide enough food for the students, they were always busy with different issues on the property and between students, and didn't have much time for themselves. Yet, they loved being there and made such a big difference in the lives of so many. This is a radical and wonderful example of what placing Christ first looks like. How might we take baby steps towards this goal as well?

I appreciate how Paul's vision in Philippians is forward facing and invites us to begin to make changes in our lives. **In Philippians 3:13, Paul stated, "...but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead"** Paul's vision for the church and for our lives doesn't dwell on the past and get stuck in all the times we have fallen short or lost our way. Rather, it focuses on what can be as we look to the future. Tying this into our modern day, it doesn't matter how we've been spending our time, money, talents, or lives up to this point... what matters is how we live moving forward. **SCRIPTURE SLIDE**

So if you have struggled in your life by prioritizing something over Christ, it doesn't always have to be that way. If much of your time is being taken up by something that isn't life giving, it doesn't always have to be that way. If you feel you have strayed too far from God, it doesn't always have to be that way. Our Lord is waiting with open arms for you to come home.

I'd like to end with the phrase that stood out to me most from our readings. Paul in verse 10 of Philippians 3 declared, **"I want to know Christ."** Isn't that beautiful? I want to know Christ. Let us claim these words and set them as our focus this week, this season, and in our lives moving forward. What is most important in your life? I want to know Christ. Amen.