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The National Presbyterian Church

Is My Life Significant

Ps.8:3-5, Matt 6:25-26; 1 Pet.2:9-10

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As we begin the new year, in our Sunday sermons we're going to be looking at **some of the Biblical principles** that I hope will help us *think as Christians / Christianly about some of the major topics that hit the news in 2015* . . . topics which certainly aren't going away any time soon.

To think Christianly

is not to say that there is always a single Christian answer to the issues of our day -- sometimes there is; often there isn't.

But it IS to say that there are definite Christian principles/Biblical principles that must be integral to our thinking as we address *those issues* . .

Issues, for example, like guns or Racism or changes in sexual mores, or climate change, or acts of violence conducted in the name of God . . .

These are the issues that hit press in 2015 that I'd like us to think about, at least in general terms, and to do so by asking a number of questions: So over the next 5 weeks we'll be asking . . .

- Is Self Defense Christian?
- Whose Life Matters?
- What's So Sacred About Sex?
- Is the Bible Environmentally Friendly?
- *and* Is Religion inherently Dangerous?

TODAY, I want to begin today on a more personal level with a perennial question: asking about our own lives, and the significance of our lives; an especially important question as we begin a new year . . . So, e.g., all of us from time to time ask questions like these: . . .

Who am I? What does my life add up to? Does my life really count? Is it significant? Do I matter?

These questions, of course, are ones that often hit us when we're feeling down, or blue, at a low point. But they're also profoundly important questions philosophically and religiously –

Philip Yancey, for example (Disappointment With God, 1988, Ch.30), *tells how Italian author, Umberto Eco, decided that life in fact had no ultimate meaning at all.*

When he was 13, Eco accompanied his father to a soccer match in Italy. He didn't particularly care for soccer, but since soccer dominated the lives of his friends, he wanted to say he'd been!!! So, he was sitting in a stadium one day watching the game, and his mind began to wander. Eco writes (Travels in Hyperreality, p.167; underlining mine))

“One day, as I was observing with detachment the senseless movements down there on the field, I felt how the high noonday sun seemed to enfold men and things in a chilling light, and how before my eyes a cosmic, meaningless performance was proceeding.

. . at that time I was thirteen and I translated the experience in my own way; for the first time I doubted the existence of God and decided that the world was a pointless fiction.”

In other words, perched high in the stadium (says Yancey), the adolescent Eco had imagined a viewpoint from above, like God's.

But from that vantage, the frantic scrambling of the human race seemed as senseless as that of grown men chasing a leather ball across the grass.

Eco himself says that it took another ten years for this crisis to unfold. But it began that day when he saw life as a meaningless series of random movements that really didn't add up to anything of significance for him (and presumably, he thought) for anyone else . .

This message is part of the sad message in a great song by Joni Mitchell that she sang in the '60's, and that came out of the woodwork again in the 2003 movie Love Actually . She sings first, innocently, about clouds, and then about love, and then about the big question: life.

*I've looked at clouds from both sides now
From up and down and still somehow
It's cloud illusions I recall
I really don't know clouds at all*

*I've looked at love from both sides now
From give and take and still somehow
It's love's illusions I recall
I really don't know love at all*

*I've looked at life from both sides now
From win and lose and still somehow
It's life's illusions I recall
I really don't know life at all . . .*

In other words, no matter how you look at things – including your own life –you can't really figure out what it all means

. . . Not very encouraging! . . . but still it's the way many people feel, and have felt -- for hundreds if not thousands of years.

It was about 2500 yrs ago, that the writer of Book of Ecclesiastes, in the Bible, wrote this:

2Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

In other words: Emptiness of emptiness; meaninglessness of meaninglessness . .

3What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

4A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

5The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises.

6The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north;

round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.

7All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full;

to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow.

8All things are wearisome; more than one can express;

the eye is not satisfied with seeing,

or the ear filled with hearing.

9What has been is what will be,

and what has been done is what will be done;

there is nothing new under the sun.

In other words: "Nothing goes anywhere; nothing leads to satisfaction; and then you die! So .. what does it all add up to?"

To which Ecclesiastes responds (if you read the rest of the book) by saying -- that if there is no God, then it all adds up to "Nothing!"

SOME PEOPLE, OF COURSE, SAY THAT YOU CAN HAVE MEANING AND PURPOSE -- REAL SIGNIFICANCE – WITHOUT GOD.

And I certainly believe that this is partly true. Temporarily at least.

Frank Sinatra . . . for example, sings about his significance *without God* by doing it ‘his way’!

*And now, the end is near, And so I face the final curtain
My friend, I'll say it clear, I'll state my case, of which I'm certain
I've lived a life that's full, I've traveled each and every highway
But more, much more than this -- I did it my way . .*

In other words, he had the power to be independent, to exert his will and his own choice; and he used it. But not everybody has that power; and in the end, even for Sinatra, the power ran out: he had no choice over the fact that death won (whether it was his way or not!).

And even with someone like Steve Jobs (who apparently grew up in a Christian home, but was highly influenced by Buddhism) there was a lingering personal issue that bothered him before his death.

According to his biographer, Walter Isaacson, Jobs was concerned not just with whether his ideas would live on beyond his life, but with whether *any of him* would linger on after death-- some part of him, or of his consciousness . . . or would he simply, well, ‘be gone’!

Or to put it another way, *if in the end*, even for a person like Steve Jobs who has more achievements, praise, riches and accolades from peers than just about anyone on the planet, with an assured place in history, *if even for him*, there was no clear resolution to the issue of significance, **then, what about us?**

Is *Doing it our way? Achieving much? Having much? Receiving praise?* is this the way to go? *Good question!* To which I’d answer by saying . . . both ‘no,’ and then ‘sort of’!!

THE IMPORTANCE OF DOING AND ACCOMPLISHING:

There is no question, for example, that what we do and accomplish can certainly give a sense of significance to our lives – especially doing something for someone else

Jesus, for example, on one occasion (Mark 14:3-9) speaks to a woman who does something significant.

At first what she does just seems strange, and, in truth, insignificant: She takes a jar of very costly ointment, and uses it to anoint Jesus’ head . . . Some criticized this action as a complete waste of time and money (the ointment was very expensive!). But Jesus responded that the action was enormously, in fact eternally, significant:

“Truly I tell you,” (he said to those gathered there), wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

And his words have come true! Here we are 2000 years later talking about her! I wonder if people will be talking about Steve Jobs, or Frank Sinatra in 2000 years?!

Now, that’s significance: an action that gets high praise from Jesus;

simply by *doing* what Mother Teresa would have called “*Something beautiful for God.*”

So, doing something that is beautiful, or helpful, or practical, for someone else, especially for Jesus can certainly give us a sense of significance.

And in fact, when we’re down on ourselves, it’s critical just to *do something* for someone! There’s always someone else, including God who needs us – who need us to do something, ***even when “the something” seems small or insignificant, or somehow beneath us.***

This is part of the message in the story Jesus tells that we call “Parable of Talents.”

In the story, three people are given 3 different amounts of money to use by their master.

Two of them use their money, and end up making more for their master.

One, however, the one with the smallest amount, does nothing – he simply buries what he’s been given in the ground. And the Master gets furious . . . as if to say:

- *You did nothing! You allowed fear. . laziness . . sloth . . to win out!!*

- *You had a pity-party about how little you had compared to everyone else . . . when what you needed to know was that*
- *Doing even a little with what you've been given, for someone else – especially for me – is all that needs to be done.*

To Jesus, it's not the amount that matters, or how many people see or notice or give praise. Instead, it's always:

- **What we do, with what we've been given**
- **And who we do it for – whether for others or for God**

So – no question about it – DOING and ACCOMPLISHING can lead to significance . . . **But, more fundamentally than that**, in the Bible, our significance primarily comes from another source, before we do a thing!

- not just from doing and accomplishing.
- but from our sense of BEING . . . of **being valued** by another.

THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR SENSE OF BEING

This sense of being is something that comes to us first of all, of course through our families.

This is what we give or seek to give to our children: . . .

- We give them *a name* – and so we tell them WHO they are!
- We give them *our love*, - and so we tell them WHOSE they are!
- and we seek to give them *knowledge, skills and security* – and so tell them that it's safe and wonderful to move into the future.
- And we launch them on their way because we value them

And when this happens, when children are valued like this unconditionally there's a peace in their being, so that without doing a thing, they know they are significant . . .

And when this doesn't happen . . . well, all kinds of crises occur.

John Trent, in his Book, The Blessing, shares stories of numerous people whose lives have been crippled in one way or another because they *never heard or felt* the unconditional blessing of a parent in their lives.

I can think, e.g., of one friend of mine, from years ago

– who became a Supreme Court Justice in his home state but carried within him all his life a burden that was hard to escape: when he failed to get into one of the top law schools in the nation (he was accepted at another fine institution) his father didn't tell him not to worry, but told that he was disappointed – not just in general, ***but in him!!*** *as if he were a disgrace to the family name, as if he would-never have a future that amounted to anything . . .*

It didn't cripple or crush him . . . (he knew he had another father, a "Father in heaven," whose opinion was different) but for decades, still, it was like a burden that would never go away: **not significant enough to the one who mattered most to him!**

Whereas some know exactly the opposite: and I'm one of those!

Since I'm a Scot, my parents (obviously!) were Scots . . . and in the 50's and 60's expressing emotion really wasn't the done thing. So I rarely if ever heard them – my father especially – say directly "I love you!"

But, **not for one moment did I doubt** their love and blessing

In a thousand ways they told me *who I was*, and *whose I was*, and showed that they would do all they could, and more, to give me a future . . . ***If anyone felt blessed, valued, and given significance by those who were most significant to me – it was me!***

But if that was not enough -- how much more blessed I was (at the same age as Umberto Eco – when I was 13 – to discover that the Most Significant One of all – God himself, the parent above all parents, was passionate in his love and blessing for my life too.

Listen again to God's Word in Scripture . . . *To what God says and how God thinks, -- about you and me.*

In the Psalms (Psalm 8:3-5)

3When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
4what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
5Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
And crowned them with glory and honor

Do you believe this for YOU?

OR From Jesus' own lips (Matthew 6:25-26)

25“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life,
what you will eat or what you will drink,
or about your body,
what you will wear.
Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?
26Look at the birds of the air;
they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns,
and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

Are you not of more value than they?

Do you believe this for YOU?

OR From Jesus' best friend, Peter (1 Peter 2:9-10)

9But you are **a chosen race, a royal priesthood,**
a holy nation, God's own people,
in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him
who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.
10Once you were not a people,
but now **you are God's people;**
once you had not received mercy,
but **now you have received mercy**

Do you believe this for YOU?

This is where the meaning and significance of our lives come from. It's always from a “Significant Other” . . . who, before we do anything, does something for us: gives us word, or a gift (often the word is part of the gift) , or themselves (as we see portrayed at the Lord's Table)

And when that someone is The Most Significant One of all . . .

Who says . . . to each of us: “*Your life matters! I want to crown you with glory and honor! I want you to know that you are chosen! I want you to know your value! You're safe within my Love. NOW, Serve me with your life . . .*” Well that's a significance that nothing and no one can take away. . . DOING AND BEING . . .

DOING . . .

- Using what we've been given
- large or small, seen or unseen
- for others, especially for God

And BEING . . .

Before we do a thing . . . remembering our value and significance to God

- Made by God. Redeemed by God
- To be beloved children of God. Friends of Jesus Christ
- To be crowned with glory and honor and mercy
- God's own people

With a future that nothing and no one can take away,
now, and for all eternity . .

Let's start the year – and continue always – with this powerful Good News!!

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