

What Really Matters
Mark 12:28–34
Sunday, October 13, 2024

Let us pray: May your word be spoken to us, Lord, so that your will might be done *in* us and *through* us, in Jesus' name. Amen.

We all know that there was a pretty bad disaster this past week. We saw it coming for days. We watched it unfold on tv, bearing down slowly over the course of the week. Which is heartbreaking, because it is so hard to watch, and you feel so helpless to stop it. And it seems like we've been seeing this more and more in recent years, and we don't exactly know why or what to do about it; why it's gotten so bad. And we know that it's going to happen again. Because this is the second time in a row that the Phillies completely fell apart and got knocked out of the playoffs. What did you *think* I was talking about?

No, of course the real disaster was Hurricane Milton hitting Florida, causing so much destruction and loss of life not even two weeks after Hurricane Helene did the same through Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina. And I'm not *making light* of the storms. I'm actually making light of the *Phillies* and our response to their loss, which a lot of people treated worse than a hurricane! And I'll be the first to admit that on Wednesday night, as the hurricane was making landfall, my primary focus was on the Phillies game. I mean, I was teaching my Supper at St. John's class with my phone on the lectern next to me, keeping one eye on the game. But then I get home and turn on the tv and see the destruction and chaos and the *real* problems that people are having to deal with, and it really puts it into perspective.

And I'm going to say something controversial here: as much as we love the Phillies, *it doesn't matter*. A *baseball game*, in the grand scheme of things, when you see people losing their homes

and their jobs and their lives, it just doesn't matter. It's *fun* (sometimes), because it helps *distract* us from the pain and problems of the world (sometimes). But times like this remind us of what really *does* matter.

The past few weeks, we have been talking about why baptism matters and why communion matters, what they *mean* and how they work in us to draw us closer to Jesus and to each other. But the one thing we did *not* talk about was *how* we celebrate baptisms and communion. Should we sprinkle a little water on the head of the person being baptized? Should we *pour* water over their head from a pitcher? Should we fully immerse them under the water, like Jesus and the first Christians did, to *really* reflect Christ's death and resurrection? Should we do it indoors or outdoors in a lake or a river? Should we baptize infants, or should we only baptize adults?

With communion, should we pass the trays or come forward? Should we have pre-cut pieces of bread or pull pieces off of a common loaf? Should we dip it in the cup or have little pre-poured cups of juice? Should we use juice, or should we use wine like Jesus did? Should we use all gluten-free bread, or should we use bread with gluten in it and just make the gluten-free bread available for whoever wants it? Should we have communion once a month, once every couple of months, or every single week?

If you go to ten different churches, you might experience baptism and communion in ten completely different ways. All of those things that I just mentioned, every single one of them is done by a church *somewhere*. And here's the funny thing: people *argue* about them. People *fight* over them (throughout history, people have *physically* fought over how the sacraments are practiced). People have *died* over it. People leave churches over it. Christians consider other Christians *less Christian* because of how they practice the sacraments.

I got a phone call a few months ago from someone at a Catholic church saying, “This person who was baptized in your church is looking to get married or become a member here, and we need to confirm with you that they were baptized.” I went and looked in our books and said, “Yes, they were baptized by a previous pastor on such-and-such a date.” They said, “Okay, but what *words* were used when they were baptized?” I said I had no idea what words were used; I was 13 years old, and I wasn’t here. They said, “Were they baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit?” I said, “I assume so. Those are the words in our *Book of Common Worship*, and they’re the words that *I* use.” They said, “But did the pastor say, ‘*I* baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,’ or, ‘*We* baptize you...?’” I thought for a moment and said, “*I* baptize you...?”

But what I *really* wanted to say is, “Are you kidding me? *That* is what we’re worried about? Not whether this person actually *lives* like a Christian, but whether the right words were said *by someone else* when they were a baby? And if the words *weren’t* right, then what? Does their baptism not count? Because I guarantee you that when *Jesus* was baptized, John the Baptist *did not* say, ‘I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. So *technically*, by *your standards*, Jesus’ baptism *does not count*.’” But I *didn’t* say that, because I knew it didn’t matter. Nothing I said was going to change the way their church views baptism, and the person I was talking to had no authority in the matter anyway, so why waste time and energy arguing about it?

So let me say something controversial again. *It doesn’t matter*. When it comes to baptism and communion, it ultimately does not matter *how* we practice it (whether we sprinkle or dunk, walk

forward or use trays, wine or grape juice). It doesn't matter. And what I mean by that is, I don't think it matters to *Jesus*.

Every month, when one of our Elders is setting up for communion, there will inevitably be some part of a conversation that ends with me saying, "*All that matters* is that people receive communion today." If we run out of pre-cut pieces and have to pull off of the common loaf? Fine. If the table isn't set up right or we use trays that don't match? It's fine. It does not have to be *perfect*. All that matters is that, *somehow*, you receive the taste of grace that is Christ's body and blood, so that you can be reminded that even though *you* are not perfect, God loves you and forgives you and can *use* you anyway.

Almost every single wedding I have done, there has been a point when I say (usually to the bride, but sometimes to the *mother* of the bride), "At the end of the day, you will be married, and that is all that matters." If a groomsman locks his knees and passes out? We can deal with that. If you walk down the aisle too fast? No problem. If the candles fall over and burn the church down, at least you're going to be married and have a great story to tell for the next 50 years. Jen and I had the complete wrong cake at our wedding; the wrong *flavor*, and it had these plastic swans all over it. It was *terrible*. But you know what we remember about our wedding? Twenty-one years later, we still laugh about the cake. Because it really didn't matter.

One of the most important things that I have learned, especially as a *parent* and a *pastor*, is knowing which things matter, and which things *don't*. What's worth getting upset about, and what is *not*? What's worth *fighting for*, and what do I just need to let go of? When you can come to that place of knowing what matters and what doesn't, there is *so much peace* there. So how do we know what really matters?

This is essentially the question that Jesus gets asked in our reading from Mark. One of the Jewish religious leaders comes up to him and asks, “Which commandment is first of all?” What is the most important commandment, of all the ones that God gave? Thou shalt not kill? Thou shalt not steal? Remember the sabbath and keep it holy? No false idols? Which commandment matters *most*?

But instead of citing one specific commandment, Jesus recites two verses from the book of Deuteronomy that are known in Hebrew as the *shema*, perhaps the most important prayer in Judaism. It says, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” It is essentially a restatement of the first of the Ten Commandments that summarizes the first *four* commandments. (The first four commandments are all about how we show love for God.)

Then Jesus says, “The *second* is, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’” which summarizes the other six commandments, which are all about how we show love for other people. And Jesus says, “There is no other commandment greater than these.” So Jesus is saying that the *most important commandment* is to love God and love other people. All of the 613 commandments that God gave are summed up in that.

What *really matters* in life, in faith is not baseball games or how we baptize or how we serve communion or what kind of music we sing in worship or what color the paint or the carpet is or how much money we have or what clothes we wear, what kind of car we drive or what kind of house we live in. What *really matters* is that we love *God* and love *our neighbors*.

And remember, love is not just a feeling or an emotion, something that exists in our heart or our head. Love is found in our *actions*. It's about the ways that we are patient and kind and hopeful and truthful; the ways that we *stick with* each other, no matter what. What really matters, Jesus says, is that we live in ways that show love for God and for other people. If we can do *that*, as Jesus says to this scribe, then we are not far from the kingdom of God. We are not far from living under the rule and reign and power and authority of God. We are not far from doing the will of God.

When we *worship*, no matter how we do it, we are showing our love for God.

When we pray, no matter what words we use, we are showing our love for God.

When we share the sacraments, no matter how we do it, we are showing our love for God.

When we sit with someone who is suffering, even when we don't know the right words to say, we are showing our love for our neighbor.

When we give of ourselves to someone who is in need, no matter how we do it or what that need is, we are showing our love for our neighbor.

When we feed someone who is hungry, we are showing our love for our neighbor.

When we pack clean up buckets for people whose lives have been devastated by a storm, no matter how many buckets we pack, we are showing our love for our neighbor.

When we are patient with someone who is hard to be patient with, we are showing our love for our neighbor.

When we forgive or seek forgiveness, we are showing our love for our neighbor.

And in showing our love for our neighbor, we actually end up showing our love for *God*.

So how do we know what really matters? Does it show my love for God and for my neighbor? *That* is the stuff that *really matters* and that we are called to be about. All of the other stuff? Maybe we don't need to worry about it so much or hold onto it so tightly. What really matters to Jesus is loving God and loving each other. That is what his whole life, death, and resurrection were about. And if we can do *that* in our individual lives and in our life together as Christ's church, then no matter what else happens – no matter how much money we have, no matter how successful (or not) we are, no matter how many members we have, no matter if our baseball team blows it again – if we can speak and act and live in ways that show love for God and for our neighbor, then we will not be far from the kingdom of God. Amen.