

WHAT MATTERS MOST

Let us pray: Praise and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen.

Wednesday morning I had my teeth cleaned at the dentist's office. The dental hygienist started scraping my teeth. She had the pick, the mirror, and her fingers in my mouth. Then she asked, "So you're a Presbyterian?" All I could say was a garbled "uh-huh." "Oh," she said, "were you raised a Presbyterian?" Again, all I could manage was a muffled "uh-huh." I just knew she was going to ask me next, "So, what do Presbyterians believe?" My answer would have sounded something like, "ba babiebe bi ba bibity, ba bobety ob Bob, ba babaity ba thriptide . . ."

Fortunately, she didn't ask me to explain what matters most in my Christian/Reformed/Presbyterian beliefs. At least, not with the pick, mirror, and her fingers in my mouth! I would have been glad to tell her some other time.

What matters most. That's a declarative statement, which suggests some kind of definitive checklist. It could also be phrased as a question, What matters most? What does matter most in your Christian faith? What are the fundamental beliefs of your life with God?

Those are questions that have been on my heart and mind the last several weeks. In Sunday School classes, in personal conversations, in discussions in small group, in elder training . . . I keep talking with people about what is most important in our Christian lives.

The "go to" verses for many people are Mark 12:29-31, where Jesus answers the scribe's question, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus tells us what matters most when he says, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Last Sunday, when Rick, Zach, Harriet, Dottie, and Joell were ordained and installed as elders, they were asked nine questions. The third question had to do with how we express our Christian beliefs in and through our Reformed/Presbyterian theology. The question asked: *Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of the church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?* The "essential tenets of the Reformed faith" — we could ask "Do you sincerely receive and adopt 'what matters most' in the Reformed faith ...?"

For the past several years, I have been a presenter at our presbytery's elder/deacon training workshops in the fall. Rev. Ernie Thompson, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, has also been one of the presenters. Ernie has a talent and a knack for presenting a most helpful summary of Presbyterian history and beliefs in a one-hour time slot. Each year he focuses on that phrase — “the essential tenets” — and concludes, “People can't really agree!” That's not to say we don't know what we believe or what matters most. Plenty of people have tried to come up with definitive lists of “essential tenets” but other people have different lists of what matters most.

Perhaps it's a good thing we don't have some kind of prescriptive list all ministers and elders have to sign in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) — or for church members to sign, for that matter. The only requirement for membership in a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a personal confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I don't know that I would go so far as to say *everything else* we believe is optional, but it's true that everything else we believe *is* grounded in our faith in Jesus Christ — what we believe about God, about creation, about grace and mercy, about the church, about sin and forgiveness, and about our purpose in life as disciples of Jesus Christ.

God has also been working on my heart (and mind) recently, because more than one of you has said something to me along the lines of, “Well, I'm just a person who sits in the pew,” or “I'm just a regular layperson” or “You're the expert. What do I know?”

At the risk of sounding like I'm chastising you or wagging my finger at you, hear me when I say, “You're not *just* a person who sits in the pew. . . You're not *just* a regular layperson . . . You *are* an expert in life because you're living it, with all of its ups and downs, all of its joys and sorrows, all of its successes and failures, all of its moments of exhilaration and heartbreak.”

When I was studying at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, VA, I had some of the best and brightest Bible teachers and theologians as my professors. I am profoundly grateful for the education I received in their classrooms. It's been almost thirty-one years since I graduated and was ordained. But my theological education has never stopped — because I have had the privilege of asking “what matters most” with people like you in churches in Rocky Mount, Roanoke Rapids, Littleton, and Wallace. I have learned from the “experts” in the pews, but it's usually in a hospital room or at the graveside of a loved one or around the session table or in lively Sunday School discussions or in the privacy of my study or in personal conversations, even in places such as Food Lion or Walgreens.

Yesterday your elders and I spent the day on retreat at the Alice Sisson Ministry Center in Wilmington. We worshiped, we prayed for you, we read God's Word, we enjoyed being together, we sought God's wisdom and guidance for the coming year. Our annual retreat is part of our ongoing effort to fulfill one of the responsibilities of elders, which is to “discern and measure [the congregation's] fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture [the congregation's] faith and life.” Our session meetings are

worship services, because we want to discover “what matters most” in our life together as the Wallace Presbyterian Church so that everything we say and do as a congregation will help all of us live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

1 & 2 Timothy are usually considered to be Paul’s advice as an older pastor whose ministry is coming to an end, to Timothy, a young pastor whose ministry is just beginning. In this particular section of his second letter to Timothy, Paul writes, “For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.” (2 Timothy 4:3-4)

Nancy and I have two dachshunds at home, Heidi (who will be thirteen on May 6) and Holden (who just turned two in mid-December). As you know, dachshunds have long, floppy ears. Sometimes, when Heidi and Holden are sitting in our laps, their ears will flop over. If you gently rub their ears, they almost immediately get this far-away, glazed look in their eyes that seems to say, “Oh, don’t stop! That feels soooooo good!”

That’s the image that comes to my mind when I read Paul’s warning/advice to Timothy about “itching ears.” Apart from our basic belief in and confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, what is it that “scratches our itch” so much that we don’t want it to stop? These days it’s easy to say that any new or different idea in the church is just “scratching an itch” and is dangerous or unorthodox or, maybe worst of all, not Biblically faithful. But how many of our long-held, much beloved beliefs and traditions do exactly the same thing?

Any of you who have been fans of the *Peanuts* cartoon over the years surely know that Charles M. Schulz included many theological and Biblical ideas and discussions in his cartoon strip. Charlie Brown, Lucy, Linus, even Snoopy — they would often reflect on life’s ups and downs from a scriptural and theological point of view.

Did you know that, as the *Peanuts* gang was becoming more and more popular between 1956 and 1965, Charles Schulz also wrote and drew a comic strip called *Young Pillars*? The cartoon was published in the Church of God’s magazine for teenagers called *Youth*. The cartoons dealt with youth fellowship picnics, Sunday School homework, and Bible themes. One cartoon showed the cartoon’s main character, a tall, gangly sixteen-year-old, intently studying his Bible. He says to one of the other characters, “Don’t bother me. I’m looking for a verse of Scripture to back up one of my preconceived notions!”¹

What matters most may bring great comfort in our Christian lives. What matters most may also challenge our most precious preconceived notions. Between now and Palm Sunday, I will be preaching on some “essential tenets of the Reformed faith.” I realize that phrase may make your eyes glaze over, and not necessarily in a good way! But hear me out — we will be listening for God’s Word to our hearts and lives from some of the greatest Scripture texts and I will ask you to think about “what matters most” for your faith and your discipleship and this church.

I hope you’re not surprised that “what matters most” or “the essential tenets of the Reformed faith” are not different from what most, if not all, Christians believe.

Then again, there are certain beliefs that are particularly associated with us Presbyterians. In this sermon series, we'll think hard and hear God's Word about who God is, what it means to say Jesus is Lord, our salvation from sin by God's grace and the persistence of sin in our lives, what role the Bible plays in our lives, God's loving care for us as his creation, our call to service as followers of Jesus Christ, living and working together in this place we call the church, how God calls us to use the gifts he gives us, and what part we can and should play as Christians in the world in which we live and work every day.

Around 1627, during the Thirty Years War in Europe, an otherwise little-known German Lutheran theologian named Rupertus Meldenius wrote a tract on Christian unity. The Thirty Years War was bloody. Religious tensions were responsible for much of the conflict and bloodshed. In his tract, Meldenius wrote an idea that has been adopted by many modern churches: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."²

I invite you to think about the essentials, "what matters most" in our Christian lives and in the Wallace Presbyterian Church. Sometimes, instead of our itching ears getting scratched, our toes might get stepped on. But that's okay, if we are really trying to be true to God's call to love him with everything we have and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Let us pray: Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

NOTES

¹Information found at www.amazon.com/Schulzs-Youth-Charles-M-Schulz/dp/0975395890

²Mark Ross, "In Essentials Unity, In Non-Essentials Liberty, In All Things Charity," at www.ligonier.org.