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## Seven Questions Every Christian Asks

### 1. Do I Matter?

Psalm 8 Common English Version Our Lord and Ruler, your name is wonderful everywhere on earth! You let your glory be seen in the heavens above. With praises from children and from tiny infants, you have built a fortress. It makes your enemies silent, and all who turn against you are left speechless. I often think of the heavens your hands have made, and of the moon and stars you put in place. Then I ask, "Why do you care about us humans? Why are you concerned for us weaklings?" You made us a little lower than you yourself, and you have crowned us with glory and honor. You let us rule everything your hands have made. And you put all of it under our power- the sheep and the cattle, and every wild animal, the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea, and all ocean creatures. Our Lord and Ruler, your name is wonderful everywhere on earth!

Matthew 10:28-31 American Standard Version And be not afraid of them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? and not one of them shall fall on the ground without your Father: but the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows.

Theologian, preacher, and writer Tex Sample once said that if the Psalms were being written today, they'd sound a lot like country music – for both the Psalms and country music are honest expressions of sorrow and sadness, joy and jubilation, lament and loss, and are written in plain speech and are meant to be sung. You may or may not be a fan of country music, and the comparison may excite you or annoy you, but I, for one, find it hard to argue with the plaintive musical expression that country singer Kris Kristofferson gives to a question that every one of us has asked at one time or another, in his now classic song, "Why Me, Lord?" With apologies to those who aren't fans of this genre of music, I nonetheless invite all of us to listen to how he expresses the question: [Click [here](#) to play] And Kristofferson's question, "Why me, Lord?" stands, really, for a whole constellation of questions that Christians ask, doesn't it? – Why do I matter? What's the purpose of my life? Could it really be possible that God cares about me? And non-Christians also raise the very same sort of questions,

summed up nicely by philosopher William James' formulation "Does the universe really care about me?"<sup>1</sup> So, this morning let us dig into that constellation of questions in this, the first of our Lenten sermon series concerning the questions that all of us have asked. I want to consider three possible answers to Kristofferson's question. First, We don't matter; second: We do matter because we earn it; and third: We matter because of our relationships.

First, then, one answer often given to our sermon's title question is a resounding "No." You **don't** in fact matter. That answer is in the ballpark of the tongue-in-check, if ungrammatical, [cartoon I have selected for our bulletin cover for today](#) – everything is matter and energy and you and I are but the temporarily conscious random products of a collision of a few common elements. It's the same sort of answer that Humphrey Bogart gives to Ingmar Bergman in the closing scene of "Casablanca" [Click [HERE](#) to play]. No individual's life is worth, in Bogart's phrase, a "hill of beans" and each life matters little or nothing compared to the life of humanity itself. What's more, from this point of view, you and I matter only for a tiny moment, for earthly life ends and we will return to being nothing more than those elements. It's Bill McMurray in "Groundhog Day" offering his view of life in the guise of a weather forecast [Click [HERE](#) to play] It's Shakespeare's Macbeth in perhaps his most famous lines [Click [HERE](#) to play]

*Signifying nothing....*

At the opposite extreme, as it were, are those who answer the question "Do I matter?" with a resounding "Yes!" – but then go on to explain that they matter only in virtue of their achievements. These are the folks that you and I know whose sense of self, whose self-worth, whose value, is inextricably tied to what they can build, produce, achieve, earn, construct, engineer, or design. They're the ones whose "mattering" is linked to the credentials they have, the degrees they've obtained, the positions they've

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. William James' "The Will to Believe." <http://educ.jmu.edu/~omearawm/ph101willtobelieve.html>

held, the money they've made. They are Varys, the character in "The Game of Thrones," who prides himself on achieving everything he has solely through his own efforts. These are the folks for whom unemployment or even simply retirement are often crises because all of a sudden the things that they had used to measure how they mattered are no longer there. These are the folks who believe that all that they are, why they matter, has been achieved solely by their own hard work.

The trouble with this point of view is that it is both never true and it is profoundly un-Christian in its implications. Comedian Stephen Colbert once did a segment in which he claimed tongue-in-cheek that his having to acknowledge that his 100+ staff members helped make possible his fame was "unfair," because he'd achieved all of his success completely by himself. So, in this segment, he fires all his staff and resumes his show with nothing more than a magic marker, a desk lamp, a white board, and an iPhone. During this parody segment, he chokes on the magic marker cap but refuses to let someone perform the Heimlich maneuver on him because that would mean he needed assistance. After the commercial break, though, Colbert re-hires all his staff and says "Let us never speak of this again."<sup>2</sup> No matter how independent or self-made you think of yourself, there are a hundred ways just this very morning in which what you did was made possible by someone else, and that will be true every single day of your life.

The Christian version of trying to matter because of what you do is often found when folks want to do something for God, do something for Jesus. Again, Kris Kristofferson's song expresses this in one of its verses: [Click [HERE](#) to play]. While nobler and less off-putting than those who claim that the reason that they matter is only due to their own efforts, the attempt to matter because of what you do for God is ultimately futile and will ultimately fail. Our reading from the Psalm this morning tells us

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<sup>2</sup><http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SelfMadeMan>

why; hear it again: *"I often think of the heavens your hands have made, and of the moon and stars you put in place. Then I ask, 'Why do you care about us humans? Why are you concerned for us weaklings?'"* The more familiar New Revised Standard translation puts it this way: *"what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"* How many of you have stood on the lip of the Grand Canyon and been silenced, words failing, at the immensity before you? How many of you have stood at the summit of Pike's Peak, looking out to the east at the vast prairie that goes on seemingly forever? In the same way, how many of you have found yourself thankful – profoundly, word-stammeringly thankful – for something about your life and want somehow to repay God for that gift? You can't do it, can you? And that, as folks from St. Augustine to Martin Luther to Kris Kristofferson have discovered, makes you anxious. In your anxiety you try to do more, find yet one more way to re-pay God, but you can't do it. It's not possible. In the end this either leads to a kind of depression or a kind of maniacal drive to nonetheless do yet one more thing to add to your score – because it is oh-so-easy to slip into thinking that such an infinite God must somehow be keeping score but has rigged the game so that nothing you can do can ever be enough. It's the Christian version of the myth of Sisyphus, always pushing that rock uphill, never to reach the top, too often scared of God because of God's very enormity and infiniteness.

Let's go a different direction. Maybe you and I matter because of our relationships. Ah, now we're onto something. Indeed the quality of our relationships, the love we put into them, the people we care about, are essential to living a life full of meaning. It is almost literally true that we cannot live without relationships; studies of prisoners cruelly kept for years in solitary confinement and divorced from all human contact show that they eventually fall into severe mental illness and their brains actually

become damaged.<sup>3</sup> Our ancient forebears in faith knew this when they wrote down what became the Book of Genesis with its oh-so-simple but oh-so-true statement *“It is not good that the man should be alone”* (Genesis 2:18), and this statement about Adam is in fact a statement about all of us. It is not good to be alone. I recall poignantly the widower who once told me one of the reasons he came to church: *“I know,”* he said, *“that at least one time a week someone will touch me again.”*

Yes, the testimony of scripture is indeed that we matter because of our relationships, and God wants those relationships to be healthy and fulfilling, God wants us to know joy in the company of others – and God expects us to use the gifts given to us to better the lives of those with whom we are in relationship. After all, we are who we are because of the love of so many others, love that we didn’t earn because of what we did or did not do. Think of those who loved you into life. Think of those who stood beside you when you were more petty than pretty, more grumbling than gracious, more sorry than saintly. The witness of scripture, the two-thousand year history of the Christian faith, is that we have been loved into being through the grace embodied in relationships. We matter because we have been loved; we matter because we love.

And yet even that cannot finally be the fullest Christian expression of why you and I matter. Why? As I often point out at funerals, it is indeed a glorious, wondrous, amazing thing to be gifted with a life that is embodied and that provides us with opportunities to love and be loved, to do, as Jesus said, *“for the least of these,”* to witness in word and deed to inclusion and loving kindness in a world too often seemingly hell-bent on exclusion, fear, and divisiveness. It is a true privilege to have been born and to have been loved and to know the beauty of a sunrise and the cry of a newborn baby. And yet we also must acknowledge – as we did a few days ago in our

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<sup>3</sup><http://solitarywatch.com/2016/05/11/isolation-devastates-the-brain-the-neuroscience-of-solitary-confinement/>

Ash Wednesday service – that every human relationship will end. Every human love will come to a conclusion. Memory will safeguard for a time why those we loved mattered to us but memory is faulty and it is finite and will one day be no more.

So why we matter cannot finally be about our achievements or even our relationships, as important as they are. But to that I say: Thanks be to God. For you see the Good News this day is that we finally matter because in God, nothing of who we are is ever lost. For God's memory is not faulty or failing. God's life is not mortal. God's love for us does not depend on whether we have earned it. God's grace is for each and all, and God's hope and expectation of justice and fairness is for each and all – for us, for the stranger, for the "different," for the immigrant, for the outcast, the misfit. All means all for God. It is not that the things that we achieve, the good that we do, the neighbor that we love don't matter; no, they matter a great deal and Jesus spends a great deal of time teaching those who would follow Him that he expects them to treat others as they would wish to be treated. And God is disappointed when we fail or when our fear trumps our hospitality or when our suspiciousness supplants our sympathy. But God will not cast us aside, God will not forget us, God will not damn us for failing to achieve what might have. But God **will** keep offering us opportunities to be transformed, to do better, to love more widely, to have our caring cut across the lines that divide, to build better bridges instead of erect bigger barriers. Why? Because now and for eternity, we matter to God. We matter to God. That is finally the most important reason that we can answer our sermon title's question affirmatively: Yes, we matter – because we matter to God. Each and every one.

Jesus puts that in a striking little image that is the basis for the song we shall sing in just a moment. Hear it again: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? and not one of them shall fall on the ground without your Father: but the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore...." Your lives are indeed held in the hands of the

One who shall never let you go. Or as Kristofferson puts it: [Click [HERE](#) to play]

Amen!