

Raising the Stakes

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Luke 3:17-20

With Christmas and the New Year our journey through the story of God has taken a turn and we find ourselves in the New Testament of the Bible and in the season of exploring the life and ministry of Jesus. The angels have announced the birth of Jesus, the shepherds have gone to worship him and Anna and Simeon have received him as God's promised Messiah. Today Jesus as an adult arrives on the scene to begin his preaching and miracle making and with that we are beginning a sermon series entitled "It's Bigger Than You". It's bigger than you. One of the great discoveries of life is the discovery that it's not all about you. This is a very difficult concept to internalize when we are two years old – or when we are 16 years old – or even when we are 50 years old. As human beings we kind of what the world to be about us. But if there is anything about the story of Jesus and the teaching of Jesus and the ministry of Jesus – it is the great truth that it is bigger than you. Life is bigger than you. The kingdom of heaven is bigger than you. In fact the great joy of living comes when you realize that your purpose in life is found outside of yourself. Joy is realized outside of yourself. And we are going to wonder about that over the next several weeks. But to begin we are going to start with you and me, because today John the Baptist is here to speak to us – and John the Baptist wants to make it about us. He has some very pointed words to say to us and about us. Today John the Baptist wants to make it about you.

It's been over ten years since the French sculptor, Arman, passed away. He was 76. Now unless you are a student and fan of modern art -- and I should say modern, avant garde art -- you will then not likely find his name familiar. I didn't find his name familiar. But I noticed his obituary way back when and the byline that

said – "Trash and found-object sculptor." This caused me to read ahead and to dig further only to learn that Arman made his name in the art world because of the material he used for his art. The material or the medium that Arman used to sculpt his sculptures was junk. The stuff that you and I throw away, the stuff that you and I take to the dump, the stuff that does not get sold at garage sales is the very stuff that Arman used to create his sculptures. Squeezed out paint tubes, abandoned cars, old buttons and typewriters, thrown away musical instruments, car parts, bicycles – he would manipulate them into his form and add them to his vision of art. Admirers of Arman's vision and those who appreciated his unusual art remained in a significant minority within the art community. It was hard to see what he was saying. Most though agreed that there was something deeply philosophical, deeply theological perhaps – in his effort to take all the things that do not matter anymore in our society, to take all those things that we want to throw away – and to turn them into a piece of art. To take the things that do not matter anymore and to turn them into something that does matter.

I suppose it could be readily agreed that we live in a society where we find it fairly easy to render things as not mattering. We live in the throw away age. We live in the disposable days. If you need evidence of that take a drive out to the end of Bee Ridge Road and you will find one of the only mountains in Sarasota. Mountain is overstating it. One of the very big hills. We call it now Rothenbach Park – but not too long ago they called it the dump. A mountain of junk – a land fill – now turned into a beautiful park. We create mountains with stuff that we think doesn't matter anymore. In the time it took me to write this sermon I filled my garbage can next to my desk over half full – with stuff that did not matter to me anymore – including the first three drafts of this sermon.

To live in a disposable society is to realize though that there is a temptation for each of us to widen our scope in respect to things that do not matter to us. In fact, we can widen our scope so wide as to say that maybe life itself ... our earthly existence ... really doesn't matter.

It is the age old philosophical and existential question – does life really have any meaning? Or are we, at the end of the day, just one more thing to be thrown away.

It is, I suppose, what was happening in the garden of Eden long ago when man and woman were created. Scripture says that when God created human beings ... he created them in his image. It's another way of saying that when God created men and women ... he created them in such a way as that they mattered. They mattered most of all. They were an extension of him ... they were in his image. "You matter to me," God said in the Garden of Eden. "It matters who you are and it matters what you do." But then as the story goes the serpent slipped into the Garden ... and the temptation begins. And at the core of the temptation is the message to Adam and Eve – that who they are and what they do ... doesn't really matter. "Go ahead," Satan says to them, "go ahead, do whatever you want it doesn't really matter. Don't worry about doing what God wants you to do it doesn't really matter." And, of course, the implied message is that Adam and Eve ... don't really matter.

And this has been the struggle of human existence ever since ... trying to decide whether or not we really matter.

Enter then the stage – one John the Baptist. John the Baptist walks onto the stage of the first century with his wild uniform of leather and camel's hair and he begins preaching that the time is soon to come ... when the Messiah will arrive. He preaches and practices a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. His is a voice crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of

the Lord. Repent. Turn your life around. Get with the program. John is one over the top preacher. The kind of preacher that gets your attention. Leaves nothing for interpretation. Repent. Turn your life around. Get with the program. And don't you wonder if what John was trying to say was that it matters. You really matter. It matters what you do, what you say, who you are. In other words the stakes are raised. A new value has been set. No such thing as junk anymore. You are the medium of a brilliant piece of art.

And so the crowds ask him, "What then should we do?" And John said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise. Tax collectors should collect no more than the amount prescribed for you. Soldiers should not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations, and be satisfied with your wages."

You see you could not get away from John without the distinct impression that everything you were and everything you did really mattered. If you have two coats it really matters what you do with them. If you have more than enough food it really matters what you do with that food. If you are a tax collector then it really matters how you collect taxes. If you are a soldier then it really matters how you soldier.

You see John is here to call us back into the Garden of Eden ... because in the Garden of Eden everything we are and everything we do really matters. And the reason John calls us there – to this place where everything matters – is because the One who made all that matters, the one whose image we bear, the one who was there at the very beginning, this very One was

“...there is nothing more that matters to [God] than who his children are and what his children do.”

coming into the world. Jesus was stepping onto the stage. And when Jesus steps onto the stage ... when the Messiah stands front and center ... then everything matters.

In Eden, you see, the old man – Adam – gave way to the temptation that nothing really matters – and into the Jordan River walks the new man – the everlasting man – the new Adam Jesus – who announces, guess what, everything matters.

Remember when you were in school and the teacher was lecturing or trying to explain a problem or a concept and it never failed that someone raised their hand and asked the proverbial Middle School question – “Do we need to know this for the test?” Well Jesus walks onto the stage, walks before the class and says guess what? Everything from now on matters. Everything is going to be on the test.

Because you see in Christ God seeks to elevate once again what it means to be human. He wants to show that how we live our lives has consequence. It matters the kind of person you are and it matters the kinds of things you do. And that’s good news.

It reminds me of the story I read a while back about the two brothers named John and Greg Rice who lived in West Palm Beach, Florida. John and Greg were two perfectly normal men except for one thing. They were dwarves. They both grew to be 2 feet, 10 inches. But that wasn’t the bad news. When they were born their mother abandoned them in the hospital. Discarded them. They didn’t, excuse the phrase, measure up. For eight months the authorities try to find them a home these cast off children. And after eight months a Pentecostal Christian family stepped forward and claimed them. Made them their children. And as those dwarf boys grew older and started their way into the world ... and into the unkind regions of childhood they got their fair share of shunning and kidding and abuse. And when they felt like they couldn’t go back out into the world it was then their good Christian mother sat them down and told them that God had made them different. God had made them smaller. But smaller never means lesser and it sometime means more. And

she pulled out a nickel and a dime. And she asked which was bigger – the nickel. But which is worth more? The dime. So, she said, you just have to think of yourselves as a couple of dimes in a handful of nickels. It’s not your size that makes your worth it’s your God that makes your worth.

So Jesus walks onto the stage and says, “My being here tells you what your worth. My being here tells you that you matter to God. My being here tells you that who you are and what you do matter to God.”

It makes me think of Cliff Richard one of the pioneers of Rock ‘n Roll in Great Britain ... before the Beatles showed up in Liverpool Cliff Richard was rocking the nation. He was the first British rocker to be knighted by the Queen a few years before Paul McCartney. Cliff Richard was known to be sort of the nasty boy of rock ‘n roll and did everything he could to perpetuate that image. But then came 1964 and a friend who introduced him to Jesus. Jesus stepped into his life and told Richard that he mattered. That what he did mattered. Cliff Richard gave his life to Christ. And it wasn’t too long after that he got involved with Christian relief effort to parts of the world like Sudan and Bangladesh. He still was huge rock figure ... but now he realized his life mattered for something else. On one of his trips he was overwhelmed by the physical disease endured by families and children and it was even hard to look at. He was afraid to touch these children with open sores and wounds. And then he recounts, “I was bending down to one little mite, mainly for the photographer’s benefit, and trying hard not to have too close a contact, when someone accidentally stood on the child’s fingers. He screamed out, and as a reflex, I grabbed hold of him, forgetting all about his dirty sores. I remember now that warm little body clinging to me, and the crying instantly stopped. In that moment, I knew that every human life matters.”

When someone asked Cliff Richard why he did so much ... when the payoff was so little in the face of such overwhelming need. Wasn’t it, the critics said, just a drop in the bucket? “Drop it may be,” he replied, “but at least the bucket’s moist.”

You know life has a way of suggesting to us ... that we are of less value than what we really are. The serpent makes his way into our lives whether it’s when we look in the mirror or make our way to work or try to pay the bills or attempt to maintain our marriage or even go out and feed the world – just about everywhere we go the evil one is suggesting to us “It’s just a drop in the bucket and it’s not worth it. It really doesn’t matter because you really don’t matter.”

But hear the good news: God has entered the world. He has come down. And now the stakes are raised. God has his stake in you and he has his stake in me. Because there is nothing more that matters to him than who his children are and what his children do.



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Church of the Palms

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