

Unvisited Tombs

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Acts 17:1-9

I'm not sure what happened to the game *Trivial Pursuit*. It was the rage for a while this game of trivia questions that tested the general knowledge of its participants. It's been a long time since I've been asked by anyone or have asked anyone to sit down and play *Trivial Pursuit*. It's just as well, I was never very good at it. The people who were very good at it were the people that had the kind of brain that held onto the names and the details of rather obscure historical events lost to the sands of time. I am always amazed at the folks that can retrieve this kind of information from their brains.

The word trivia comes from the Latin tri – meaning three, and via – meaning road. Tri-via means three roads and referred to intersections where three roads came together. And it came to be a way to describe a public or common place. Highly trafficked. Where commonplace and ordinary things occurred. Trivial things are common things, unnoticed things. And somewhere along the way it came to be understood that common ordinary, unnoticed things were somehow unimportant things. Trivial events are unimportant events. If they don't make the headlines well then they must not be important. Trivial.

I love that plaque that sits at the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln in Hodgenville, Kentucky that captures an imagined conversation between two Kentucky farmers back in 1809 –

“Any news down t’ the village, Ezry?” asks the one farmer.

“Well, Squire McClean’s gone t’ Washington to see Madison swore in and Spellman tells me this

Bonaparte fellah has captured most of Spain. What’s the news out here?”

“Nuthin. Nuthin atall. Cept for a new baby born down t’ Tom Lincoln’s. Nuthin ever happens out here.”

Trivial is in the eyes of the beholder.

The name *Bob Easterbrook* could be an answer to a trivia question. It would fall under the category of sports and more specifically the category of baseball. But you would have to be close to a savant to be able to get that far to know that Bob Easterbrook would be associated with the game of baseball. Because you would have to know that Bob Easterbrook never made it to the Major Leagues. He never made it to the big time. He got only as far as playing in the minor leagues – and even there he bounced around from team to team for about ten years. He never set the world on fire. So there would be no reason for you to know or remember the name Bob Easterbrook unless you realized that Bob Easterbrook happened to be on a minor league team called the Trenton Thunder from Trenton, New Jersey the day when a young African-American received his first contract to play professional baseball and joined the team – one Willie Mays. The first African-American to join not only the Trenton Thunder, but the entire Class B Interstate League. OK so what? Bob Easterbrook was on Willie Mays’ first minor league team – so were about two dozen other guys. So what? Well the so what came the evening of Willie Mays’ first day of professional baseball in Hagerstown, MD when the team bus drove to the other side of town and deposited the young player to stay alone in a hotel across the tracks because it was forbidden for an African-American to lodge in certain hotels in that town including the hotel that the Trenton Thunder was staying in. The so what came that evening when the young man Willie Mays laid awake alone in his hotel far away from not only his team but his home – and a knock came to the window of his hotel room.. The so what came in the knock of one Bob Easterbrook. Bob Easterbrook along with two others of the team had snuck out of the hotel and

made their way across town and stood knocking on the window and when Willie Mays opened the door he heard Bob Easterbrook say – no member of the team stays alone. And Bob Easterbrook and his two

ruckus. People are beginning to leave their long held beliefs and are following after these strangers with their wacky claims of resurrection and salvation and forgiveness. And the town is in an uproar. And in the

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companions slept on the floor the first night of Willie Mays’ professional baseball career. The next day the manager of the Thunder inserted Willie Mays into the outfield for the first time in place of, you guessed it, Bob Easterbrook.

Who was Bob Easterbrook? Bob Easterbrook was one of the men who snuck across town and slept on the floor so that a young Willie Mays would not that night have to stay alone.

Now I submit to you that is a trivia question that is not trivial. And I further submit to you if somehow trivial has come to mean unimportant – then there is no such thing as a trivial person. There is no such thing as a trivial moment.

I wonder if that isn't a little bit of what is behind the story we just read from the Bible. The story is about two of the headliners of the New Testament. Paul and Silas. Paul and Silas are the Simon and Garfunkel, the Batman and Robin, the Bert and Ernie, the Lewis and Clark of the New Testament. They are the team that bring the good news across a big part of the Roman Empire. And in the Acts of the Apostles they have their very own biographer – Luke the Physician – who immortalizes the lives of these two great apostles. And so the story goes that Paul and Silas make their way to Thessalonica, a Macedonian city later to become a Greek city – and there they start to cause a

midst of the chaos somehow Paul and Silas slip out of sight and leave behind these new Thessalonian followers to clean up the mess. And in particular they leave behind one Jason. Jason who had been gracious enough to host these rabble rousers. Jason who is now courageous enough to stand up to the riotous mob. Jason who is now generous enough to stand up for his guests and to make bail for them. Jason. Luke mentions him three times.

Now can I be honest with you? I've read and studied the Bible for a long time – and I cannot remember if I have ever noticed the name Jason in the Bible. If the trivia question had been for me – “Who is Jason in the Bible?” I would be as clueless as if you would have asked me not long ago about Bob Easterbrook. And the question would have felt trivial. It would have felt unimportant. But for Luke Jason is not unimportant. Jason is a part of the story. He has not performed any miracles. He has not preached any eloquent sermons. He has not written any foundational documents of the Christian faith. He has just stood up for some new friends. Invited them into his home and vouched for them when the going got tough.

You see, there is no such thing as a trivial person. The New Testament has its headliners to be sure, but the Bible is filled with all sorts of mentions of all sorts of names. And for many of them, that's all you ever hear

about them - is their name. Sometimes you can't even hear their name. But behind each of them is a story. There is no such thing as a trivial person. Every single person has a part to play in this drama called life.

And that can be a hard thing to remember can it not? It can be a hard thing to remember that when you and I are going about our days in the to and fro of life, in the fast run around of life, in the transactional nature of life – it can be really difficult to remember that the person in front of me and alongside of me is not trivial. Is not unimportant. We all have a role to play.

When I go to get my tires changed on my car through the window I watch a man take my tires off and put on the new ones. And as I'm watching I am thinking of how much I trust this man. This man I have never met. I trust that he knows how to change a tire. I trust that he not only knows how to change a tire but that he cares enough about his job to take the time to do the job right. To not forget this lug nut or that lug nut. Because in a moment I will be driving that car down the highway at 70 mph and my life is riding on this man whose name I do not know.

I can remember the names of all my teachers with the exception of my kindergarten teacher. I cannot remember her name. Shame on me. But what I can remember are the mornings when I five years old and could not wait to go to school. I loved kindergarten. It was probably the only level of education I was ever able to understand. But I know enough about that classroom to know that it was safe and warm and fun. And maybe I learned some letters and numbers. But I don't remember the teacher. But I know enough to know that because I was 5 years old she was having an enormous impact on my personality and sense of worth and identity. And I don't remember her name!

When I am at the restaurant and the waitress comes up to me and tells me her name – “Hi,” she says, “my name is Samantha.” And behind Samantha there is this story and who knows what is happening in Samantha's life. Maybe she just broke up with her

boyfriend. Maybe she is three days into being sober. Maybe she is harboring a dream to be a doctor. But before me is this mysterious and wonderful human being and she is not trivial, right. The tire man is not trivial. The kindergarten teacher is not trivial. Jason is not trivial. We are so desperate to be treated well by each other. To be stood up for. To be honored. To be protected. Because the world can be not so nice. Right?

Who we are, what we say, how we act, what we think – it matters. If there is anything our young confirmands have attested to today – in confirming their baptisms – it is that when we attest to God as Father and Creator and Jesus as Son and Savior and the Holy Spirit as the sustaining power of our lives – it has elevated the price tag on our lives. Each of us carries this intrinsic value. Which is to say that if we have come from this great God who calls all things good – and that there is nothing trivial about us. Everything matters. We affect the world. We affect Jason, Samantha and the tire guy. It is what it means to be alive – we make a difference one way or another in other people's lives.

Carl Rowan the prize winning columnist of a couple decades ago spoke often of the influence in his life of a woman named Bessie Gwinn. Bessie Gwinn was a schoolteacher that Rowan had while growing up in McMinnsville, Tennessee. She was a teacher at a Jim Crow High School there in McMinnsville and young Carl Rowan was her student. She taught Carl Shakespeare and Chaucer and Milton and the scriptures. She taught Carl about similes and metaphors and good grammar. After graduating from high school and college Carl went on to become an accomplished journalist --- nominated one year for the Pulitzer Prize.

When Bessie, his teacher, turned eighty-five she was to be honored at a testimonial dinner by a group of her students and teachers and Carl was invited to come and say a few words. As fate would have it he

had been invited also on the same night to attend a White House dinner hosted by then President Jimmy Carter. How often in a lifetime do you get invited to a White House dinner? Rowan sat down and wrote this letter in response to the President's invitation:

Dear Mr. President: I received your letter three days after I had agreed to speak a few words at a dinner honoring the wonderful high school teacher who taught me to write. I know you will not miss me at your dinner but she might at hers. Sincerely yours, Carl Rowan.

President Carter wrote back: *Dear Mr. Rowan: Presidents come and go, but a good teacher lasts a lifetime.*

And so my confirmand friends – this journey you begin today as followers of Jesus will lead you to discover more and more things about God than you know right now. More and more about the Bible that you know right now. More and more about the world than you know right now. But if there is something I hope you know right now that will never change – is that you are not trivial. And anyone who comes your way is not trivial. We need each other. The Jason's, the Samantha's, the tire guys, the Bessie Gwinn's, the Bob Easterbrook's. And God is pleased when we see ourselves and we see others as he sees us everyday.

Or as George Eliot said it: “For the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”



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Church of the Palms

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