“Strengthen Your Core”

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Philippians 1:9-11
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Core strength is a buzz word at gyms and fitness centers these days. Personal trainers emphasize the importance of improving our core strength. The 30 or so muscles in our torso comprise core strength. These muscles in our abdomen, pelvis and back generate 60 percent of the body’s power. They supply balance and stability to our bodies. By strengthening these muscles, it’s possible to improve posture, reduce back pain and increase mobility.

Core strength is also vital to spiritual health. What is core to us as a church and individual Christians in terms of core beliefs and values? What’s most important?

At the outset of this letter to the Philippians, Paul prays that, their “love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight to help you to discern what is best” (Philippians 1:9-10). To discern what is best determines what is most important. Life offers a smorgasbord of choices. What is most important to you? What really matters?

I periodically ask myself, in life and ministry, what is core? What do I really care about? I can’t die on every hill for each cause that comes along. What really matters?

I’ve arrived at five things that are most critical. I care about more things than five, but these five always appear on my short list of things that truly matter. As I walk through these five things, pay attention to what matters in your life.

The first thing concerns human nature. People are flawed. There is something defective in us that we cannot fix ourselves.

Last fall, we devoted 12 Sundays to telling David’s story. I grew up in Sunday school thinking David was a hero, no doubt bolstered by David’s improbable defeat of the giant Goliath. As I preached through David’s story, I gained new appreciation for the complexity in David’s life. He has his virtues; he has his flaws. He’s something of a saint and sinner rolled into one.
Maybe you find it disconcerting to discover that our Biblical heroes have feet of clay. I find it reassuring. If any of you struggle with whether God really loves you, read David’s story. If God can love a sinner like David, there’s hope for us also.

As we worked our way through David’s story, some of you asked about the amount of sex and violence in David’s story. I said to some of you that I’ll answer your question about the mess in David’s life when you explain to me why there’s so much sex and violence on TV and in the movies. There’s sex and violence in David’s life because there’s sex and violence in real life.

Every Biblical hero is deeply flawed. Yet, that’s precisely the point! All of us are flawed; each of us in our own way.

I watched a PBS special some years ago, Genesis, moderated by Bill Moyers. A host of experts from diverse religious backgrounds assembled to discuss the issues raised in Genesis. It’s only three chapters into Genesis before that wily serpent takes people out. As the panelists tiptoed around the problem of human sin, a novelist, Mary Gordon, said something that brought everybody on point again: “People just aren’t right,” she said. “There is something fundamentally wrong with us that we cannot fix ourselves.” My sentiment, precisely! What are we to do with the problem of sin?

The second thing concerns God. God’s grace is amazing.

Tim Keller writes in his book, Prodigal God, “The Bible’s purpose is not so much to show you how to live a good life. The Bible’s purpose is to show you how God’s grace breaks into your life.”

Keller lays forth two basic identities or worldviews held by Christians today. The first identity is what he calls the “moral improvement narrative.” He summarizes the moral improvement narrative with the words “I obey; therefore I am accepted by God.” It’s our virtues which first attract God’s favor. God rewards obedience with divine favor.
Keller calls the second identity the “grace narrative.” He encapsulates the grace narrative this way, “I am accepted by God; therefore I obey.” Our obedience flows from God’s antecedent grace. We love because God first loves us. We do not earn God’s favor. We are bestowed favor by this benevolent God.

Grace is counterintuitive to most people. We have come to believe that pretty much everything in life has to be earned. The notion of justice, which is getting what a person deserves, makes more sense to us.

Grace is not getting what we deserve; it’s getting more than we deserve. John Newton, the former slave ship captain turned preacher, wrote a hymn about grace known as “Amazing Grace.” Newton had this to say about grace: “I am not what I ought to be. I am not what I want to be. I am not what I hope to be in another world, but still I am not what I once used to be. And by the grace of God, I am what I am.”

The third thing concerns Jesus. The first creed of the Christian church is the simple, yet profound, affirmation “Jesus is Lord.”

God offers the world something unique in Jesus Christ. What God offers in Christ is found in no one else. Jesus is in a class all by himself.

That’s why we bestow on him the designation Lord with a capital “L.” Jesus is the Lord of all lords. No other deity, king or sovereign, is worthy of such honor.

Can I really get away with making such an exclusive claim about Jesus in a pluralistic age? What about other world religions? Other religions have much to teach us about God and the world. There is truth and goodness in other religions also. That said, I believe there is something absolutely unique about Jesus.

I appreciate what the evangelist D.T. Niles said, “Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.” I don’t pretend to know all the truth that possibly can be known. I’m like one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.
The fourth thing concerns the Bible. The Bible has real authority.

When I was ordained to Word and Sacrament ministry in this church, I answered in the affirmative the question, “Do you accept the Scripture of the Old and New Testament to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal and God’s Word to you?” I affirmed Scripture to be God’s “unique and authoritative witness” in my life.

We struggle today with authority. We question authority. We resist submitting to anyone’s authority. We want to be our own authority. But there’s the problem: the human self has proven to be a notoriously poor authority. We are prejudiced by our own biases and illusions. We need an external reference point to exercise appropriate authority over our lives. When we declare Scripture as our authority, we acknowledge it to be reliable and dependable. We trust the Bible to tell us the truth about God, ourselves and the world.

Our church and wider culture wrestles today with all sorts of social issues—abortion, divorce, homosexuality, immigration—the list goes on and on. There’s a growing tendency these days to place personal experience over Scripture. What has authority for my life is what I have experienced. The church has long affirmed that personal experience is placed under the authority of Scripture and not over it.

The fifth thing concerns the church. Flawed churches make disciples. It only stands to reason if people are flawed, then churches are flawed also.

Eugene Peterson writes categorically, “There are no successful churches. There are, instead, only communities of sinners, gathered before God, week after week, in towns and villages all over the world.”

I’m not excusing sin in the church. There is no justification for backbiting and destructive gossip. No place! Yet, let’s be realistic. We can’t expect the church to become something people are not.
A man asked me, “Can I get to know Jesus without the church?” “Yes,” I told him. “All you have to do is read the gospels. Jesus doesn’t say anything about joining the church for salvation. All you have to do is open your heart to Jesus.” I then added a qualifier: “But there’s no way to grow into mature disciples of Jesus without the church.” We need Christians to challenge and support us.

The gospel of Jesus Christ knows nothing of a solitary religion. We need other Christians to challenge and support us. It’s dangerous to live the Christian life on our own. We need other people to push against and encourage us in the things of faith. I have found that some things about the Christian life are revealed only in community.

There you have it. Five things that are core to me: people are flawed. God’s grace is amazing. Jesus is unique. The Bible can be trusted. And flawed churches make disciples.

So, what difference does this sermon make in my life? Ask yourself, what is core to you? What really matters? I think of something Goethe wrote 250 years ago: “Things which matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least.”

Some things are more important than other things. So, live for things that matter.