The Three Priorities

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. E. Stanley Ott
Acts 28:11-16, 30-31

April 26, 2015
We are enjoying *The Story* as we trace the history of God’s people and the wonderful ways our Lord has always been present to his people and is present to you and to me this very moment. We are reading about the beginning years of the church. We learn that in a flash of blinding light, Jesus Christ confronted Saul, the greatest doubter of Jesus and enemy of the followers of Jesus. Paul, as Saul was also called, became a follower of Jesus, spending the rest of his life leading others to follow Jesus.

Our readings last week in *The Story* covered Paul’s final days described in the Book of Acts, and we view the entire life of the Apostle Paul laid out before us. We can see what he wanted his life to count for. Whether you are 14, 44 or 84 years old, a good question to ask is, “What do I want my life to count for?” What are the things most significant to you? Once there was a dad who was attempting to get his 14-year-old daughter to study for a test. "Daughter," he said, "when Abraham Lincoln was your age, he walked 14 miles in the snow to get to school every day. He came home and studied by candlelight each night, always doing his homework for the next day." To which his daughter replied, "Dad, when Abraham Lincoln was your age, he was President of the United States.”

Well, regardless of your age, whether you are 14, 44, 84 or 98, as a dear friend of mine is, a great question is, “What do you want your life to count for?” What is bigger than a test you have to take or even bigger than being President of the United States? I know what captures many of us when we think about what we want our own lives to count for is what captured the Apostle Paul. Paul’s life was captured by three priorities: First Jesus Christ; second, the body of Christ – those who trust and follow Jesus, also known as the church; and third, the work of Christ in the world. I like the way my friend Chuck Miller expresses these three priorities:

- A growing commitment to Jesus Christ
- A growing commitment to the Body of Christ (the church)
- A growing commitment to the work of Christ in the world.

You can think of the three priorities as up, in, and out. Up – a growing commitment to Jesus Christ is first. The Great Commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and

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1 Brian Bauknight, former pastor of Christ United Methodist Church, Pittsburgh, PA

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with all your strength, and with all your mind (Luke 10:27a). The first priority faces up, the second priority faces in – a growing commitment to the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ includes all of the followers of Jesus who have ever lived. This commitment to the Body of Christ is captured in the New Commandment of Jesus: Love one another even as I have loved you (John 14:35). Up, in, and finally, out – a growing commitment to the work of Christ in the world as expressed in The Great Commission: “Go into all the world and make disciples,” (Matthew 28:19-20), and the Great Commandment: “And thy neighbor as Thyself” (Luke 10:27b).

I will tell you Jesus is everything to me! He is my first priority and I pray you open yourself to Jesus as your own first priority as well. And why would a growing commitment to Jesus Christ be your first priority? As the Apostle Paul so wonderfully put it, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings” (Philippians 3:10). It’s about knowing Jesus. It’s about being loved by the God who loves you more than you love your own next breath. It’s about wanting to follow Jesus wherever he leads, no matter what and no matter when, because your heart simply wants to follow. As they sang in the old sixties pop song, “I Will Follow Him,” and in the movie, Sister Act, “I will follow him, wherever he may go…I love him, I love him and wherever he goes I’ll follow, I’ll follow, I’ll follow, I will follow him!”

Make following Jesus your first priority in life.

2 “He’s Everything to Me” Ralph Carmichael
3 "I Will Follow Him" by Arthur Altman; Paul Julien A Mauriat; jacques Plante; Norman Gimbel; Franck Marius L Pourcel.
I love the story Pat Williams tells of his early years in professional sports. As a young man I became general manager of a minor league baseball team in South Carolina. I decided to try some ideas to pack the ball park with fans — I hired a skydiver for one game, had a watermelon eating contest — a vacation drawing and a barnyard scramble with the baseball players chasing animals all over the field. Attendance soared. One day I lined up the strongest man in the world, Paul Anderson, to do a show. It was a perfect night — not too hot — a clear sky — a crowd over 2000 people. As the sun dropped behind the behind the ballpark, I escorted Paul onto the field. At 300 pounds he was an impressive sight, with arms bigger than most men’s thighs, his chest like a barrel. I introduced him over the microphone and headed for the dugout to watch.

“First, Paul took a nail in one hand and two one-inch boards in the other - he slammed the nail through both boards. The crowd gasped. He lifted two 85-pound dumbbells with his little fingers. He pressed 250-pound barbells eight times over his head. Then he called our eight heaviest players onto the ball field and had them sit on a special wooden platform – each man weighed over 200 pounds – the total was nearly a ton. Paul climbed under the platform, positioned himself and, with his great body quivering in a tremendous surge of strength, he lifted the entire platform. The crowd went wild.”

Pat Williams said the act was over but instead of leaving the field, Paul Anderson began to speak, ignoring the microphone, his big voice booming into the grandstand. “I’ve lifted more weight than anyone in the history of mankind,” he roared, “and once lifted over 6000 pounds in a back lift. I have been declared a wonder of nature. I’ve won gold at the Olympic Games. They call me the strongest man in the world.” Paul paused a moment and then said something I love, “I want you to know, ladies and gentlemen, that all of these things are secondary in my life.” And you know right away Paul has a higher priority in his life. “I, Paul Anderson, the strongest man on the face of the earth, cannot get through a single day without Jesus Christ. The greatest thing in my life is being a Christian. If I can’t make it without Christ, how about the rest of you?” Jesus was his first priority. I encourage you to make Jesus your first priority.
This brings us to the second priority, a growing commitment to the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ refers to the church—not a particular church like VPC—but all of the believers and followers of Jesus who have ever lived. Paul’s commitment to other followers of Jesus began with his conversion to Jesus. As he put it, “While I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’” (Acts 9:3-5). That’s such a great question! “Who are you, Lord?” We know the answer, but Saul is clueless. As far as he is concerned Jesus is dead. The astounding reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” It only took Jesus a hundredth of a second between his words, “I am Jesus” and his words “whom you are persecuting” but to Saul I’ll bet in that hundredth of a second the world swirled and time froze. “Whaaat? Jesus? JESUS!” At least two stupendous, overwhelming insights crashed in on him.

First, clearly, obviously, irrefutably, Jesus is alive. The resurrection actually did happen. Jesus is God, raised from the dead. Second, Jesus said, “You are persecuting Me.” Wait a minute, Paul must have thought, “I haven’t been persecuting you, Jesus. I thought you were dead, but I have been jailing your followers,” and Paul realizes that Jesus is telling him of the intimate connection between Jesus and his followers. As Augustine put it, “It was the head in heaven [Jesus] crying out on behalf of his members here on earth.” However, Jesus did not say, “Why do you persecute my members?” but “Why do you persecute ME?” He totally identifies with his followers. We are part of him. No wonder Paul spent so much time writing about the concept of the Body of Christ. As a believer in Jesus, Jesus becomes your head; you are a part of his Body. What happens to you, happens to him. When you hurt, he hurts, when you are persecuted, he is persecuted; when you are praised, he is praised; when you are loved, he is loved, and when he is loved you are loved. The church, the fellowship of God’s people, becomes the most significant group of your life if you will follow him.

There are many implications of this for our daily lives. For example, we are to join with God’s people every week in worship that we are able to do so. You may not know this, but worship attendance in America is declining. It’s not declining because there are fewer believers, fewer followers of Jesus. It is declining because we’ve made worship an option.
and so we show up when we don’t have something else going. Thom Rainer puts it this way: “The number one reason for the decline in church attendance is that members attend with less frequency than they did just a few years ago. For example, if 200 members attend every week the average attendance is, obviously, 200. But if one-half of those members miss only one out of four weeks, the attendance drops to 175. Everyone is still relatively active in the church. But attendance declined over 12 percent because half of the members changed their attendance behavior slightly.”

A growing commitment to Jesus Christ means a commitment to be with God’s people every week in worship. It also means a commitment to be with a smaller group of Christians, preferably every week, who gather for Bible study and of course a commitment to family.

Finally, we come to the third priority, a growing commitment to the work of Christ in the world. Whatever Jesus is doing in this world, we are invited to be a part of it. Another way to put it is with the Halverson Benediction I love, “Wherever you go, God is sending you, wherever you are, he has put you there; he has a purpose in your being there. Christ, who indwells you, has something He wants to do through you, wherever you are.” It’s having the eyes of Jesus for people, what we call people eyes, seeing people the way Jesus sees them, worn out and thrown down, and serving them.

The work of Christ in the world is everything Jesus is doing – offering compassion, sharing the good news of Jesus and standing up for justice. The Apostle Paul focused on sharing the good news of Jesus with others. So, the very last words in the Books of Acts are, “He lived there [in Rome] two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:30-31).

So you and I are invited to speak of our Lord. I remember attending a church meeting one evening and afterwards Marion pulled me aside. She said, “Stan, my next door neighbor has had a horrible year with relationship problems and health problems. She came over to see me this morning and said, “Marion, there is something about your life that is amazing. You have a joy and serenity about you no matter what is going on. Tell me, what is it about you that makes you this way?” Marion then

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said to me, “Stan, I know the answer is Jesus, Jesus who loves me, Jesus whom I follow, Jesus who is with me in every situation of my life. But I can’t tell her that. It’s too embarrassing. Stan, since you are my pastor, will you tell her?” I replied, “Marion, while I can do that and will do it if need be, you do realize your dear neighbor sees the reality of Jesus in you. How wonderful it would be if you take the courage to simply tell her. Simply invite her to open her own life to Jesus.” Marion said, “Well, okay,” and she did. Her neighbor discovered the joy of Jesus because of Marion’s commitment to the work of Christ in the world!

May these three priorities of the Apostle Paul and of the whole people of God become your personal priorities: That you define your life, shape your life and center your life on Jesus, on the Body of Jesus - that is the people of Jesus – and doing the work of Jesus in this world empowered by the Spirit of Jesus!

A growing commitment to Jesus Christ
A growing commitment to the Body of Christ (the church)
A growing commitment to the work of Christ in the world

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6 To read more about the Three Priorities, read Lord, Make My Life a Miracle, by Ray and Anne Ortlund