



What Matters:

Gnats and Camels

Two weeks ago, in the Shenandoah Update, I posed the “wrestling question” of what matters; this against the backdrop of the pillar of fire that calls us to move at God’s convenience, not ours. This week, and next, I’d like to continue to reflect on “what matters” as a way of speaking about our life together as a District.

Several images haunted me while penning this article. Two events, in particular, lingered with me throughout the week.

The ongoing war in Ukraine and the continued suffering of the innocents. This is against the danger of nuclear escalation. The level of suffering portrayed and the impact on a way of life staggers our ability to comprehend.

The disproportionate impact of the pandemic, inflationary pressures, and economic transitions on our children. Particularly children who were vulnerable before. The pandemic highlighted the gap between opportunity and access that exists. “Let the children come to me,” says Jesus.

There is a sobering passage in Matthew 23 which further clarifies “what matters.” Matthew 23 is comprised, in part, of seven woes. These can be seen in contrast to the beatitudes which stand as a model for our behavior and attitudes. Largely directed at the religious leaders of the time, these words serve as a reminder to us all of the dangers of losing sight of “what matters.”

I found verses 23-24 especially intriguing. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat but swallow a camel” (NRSV). At its simplest, the verse indicates we are tempted to pay attention to the smallest things, e.g., mint and gnats, but ignore things that are most important, the practice of justice, mercy, and faith.

To illustrate further, I will be drawing from the NRSV and William Barclay’s New Daily Study Bible on the Gospel of Matthew. The NRSV speaks of “straining out a gnat.” Barclay gives further depth to this understanding when he speaks of the practice of straining wine to rid it of any impurities, e.g., gnats. The humorous picture is of a person carefully straining wine through gauze to avoid swallowing a

microscopic insect yet cheerfully swallowing a camel. Barclay calls this a loss of proportion (The Gospel of Matthew – Daily Study Bible – Page 429).

And so... One way of focusing my day is how much attention I am giving to “straining gnats.” Note that Matthew does not say these “small things” are unimportant. “It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the other.” However, preoccupation with gnats distracts us from “what matters.”

That is the same question I pose in our life together. Whether at the congregation or District level, the clear mandate of Matthew 23 is developing the ability to discern between “what matters,” the practice of justice, mercy, and faith, and items of secondary importance.

Leadership of every kind needs to pay attention to that question. We simply cannot afford the luxury of becoming distracted by the myriad issues and items demanding our allegiance. The primary way of clarifying “what matters” is to ask what matters to Jesus and align our life in conformity to those understandings. One of the joys of serving as your district executive minister is the numerous conversations, both individually, with congregations, and with District leadership, on precisely the question of “mattering.” That question is much on our minds, albeit with a variety of lenses through which we peer.

What is clear is the necessity of engaging with intentionality the nature and shape of our future together. Together deciding/reflecting on “what matters.”

In the next Update, along with the District Executive report to District Conference, I will suggest several “Trajectories of Hope.” Places of intentional engagement, conversation and decision-making that could assist us in the next phase of life together.

In the midst of what we acknowledge are significant challenges, I continue to see God’s hand at work, calling, shaping and forming our priorities into the likeness of Christ.

Serving Christ together,

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