

What's Different Now
Psalm 126; 1Thessalonians 5:12-28
Rev. Dr. Jill Duffield

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Earlier this week I asked our staff to do a little mental time travel and remember back to that place and time long ago and far away, that place and time called June. Remember June? You know, eight weeks ago, give or take? Mentally revisit where you were then, what was happening and what you were feeling all the way back to two months ago?

Here at the church, we were gearing up for our Fall kick off, imagining a big ta-da! After a lot of months of what felt like making do. We had plans to have an extended staff meeting where we would dig into the meaning of “hybrid-church” and get some theological underpinnings in place as we planned our programming in this new post-pandemic reality. We had our theme in place, our calendars filled out, our minds focused. It felt to me as if we were at the starting block getting ready for the referee to say, “On your mark, get set, go!” and then, well, and then here we are at the end of August, and it no longer feels like we are about to take off without limits or impediments.

What about you? Thinking back to June, or maybe last June or maybe last week: What's different now? Our world feels different today than it did on Wednesday and for some, I know, there have been events that make today radically different than it was just a short time ago.

I wonder what the elders who are rotating off of active service on our Session would say if we were to ask them what is different now from when they stood three years ago in this chancel and answered in the affirmative questions about trusting Jesus and accepting Scripture and loving neighbors and working for the reconciliation of the world. I suspect none of them envisioned hand sanitizer at every entrance or worshippers in masks or great gratitude for the return of pew cushions and who could have imagined Presbyterians would long to sing with abandon? And yet here we are at the end of August 2021 distanced but glad to be in the building together.

What's different for you now from June? From a year ago? From last week? If you were to make a list in response to these questions, what would you write?

In light of that list, what matters now?

Much has changed for me and for my family over the last year, transitions abound, many of them welcomed and oh, so, good, but some of them not of our choosing and very painful. All of them make me wonder, not with cynicism but with what I hope is sincere curiosity: What matters now? How would you answer that question?

Would you say that your relationships matter more now? That honesty with yourself, with others, really matters in this moment? Humility? Gratitude? Trust in God? Noticing beauty? Relishing joy?

Alternatively, what really doesn't matter now? For me, one who admittedly has been pretty achievement oriented much of my life, I recognize now that accomplishments matters much less than authentic relationships. I am sure as a person of faith, a follower of Jesus, this should always have been so, but if I am going to be honest, too often getting things done has taken priority over being with others. Even though Jesus said to consider the lilies of the field and wise theologians like Sam Wells remind me, "The deeper human task is to try not to record, retain, or embellish one's life; but to live it." (Incarnational Ministry Still, page 53) It is all too easy to get caught up in achieving measurable results at the expense of messy compassion.

Given our current reality and all that is different now, what matters now, what doesn't really matter that much anymore?

Discerning the answers to these questions, is a holy challenge and a divine charge, and particularly the call of the spiritual leaders called to serve on the Session. We are asked to discern together the will of God, the mind of Christ, and the leadings of the Spirit. This is no small task, but one for which God equips us. A calling for which we have clear guidance in the person of our Savior who healed on the Sabbath. We can look to the living Word of our Scriptures chock full of God working through earthly chaos and we can consult the record of our Confessions that came to us after no small amount of debate and conflict.

As we seek to do what is best for Christ's church, what is faithful and reflective of the One we follow, Paul's charge to the Christians in Thessalonica offers us guidance, too. It gives us a concise rendering of what really matters no matter our time or circumstances. Listen again to these verses and, in the words of Marilyn McEntyre, "pause where Scripture gives you pause" and "notice what you notice":

...we ask you to recognize the value of those who work hard among you—those who, as followers of the Lord, care for you and tell you how to live. ¹³ Show them the highest respect and love because of the work they do.

Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ We ask you, siblings, to warn those who will not work. Encourage those who are afraid. Help those who are weak. Be patient with

everyone. ¹⁵ *Be sure that no one pays back wrong for wrong. But always try to do what is good for each other and for all people.*

¹⁶ *Always be full of joy.* ¹⁷ *Never stop praying.* ¹⁸ *Whatever happens, always be thankful. This is how God wants you to live in Christ Jesus.*

What did you notice? What gave you pause? The list is pretty relational, isn't it? All about our connection to God and our care for one another. There is nothing in this description of Christian living that tells us to achieve worldly greatness. Paul tells those early Christians to focus on their relationship to Jesus Christ and the love of others that flows from it.

I think I've shared before Samuel Wells' insight that life is not a problem to be solved, but instead a mystery to be entered into. I think, after the last few months, the last few years, the last few days even, I am more willing to stop trying to problem solve and instead openly, eagerly, honestly, hopefully humbly enter the mystery of this one life God has given us.

Wells writes, "The church knows genuine accomplishment is rare and there is no next thing to move on to. ...A conventional model might suggest that we dedicate the endeavor to God, then act and achieve, and finally pause and give thanks. Mystery suggests a different model. *It expects things to go wrong and for the wrong turnings to be more interesting than the seamless accomplishment would have been. It assumes that God is more fully made known in these wrong turnings than in effortless perfection.*" Perhaps what is different now is that we know in our bones the grace of God discovered in wrong, unplanned turns.

This kind of realization, Wells argues, leads to a delight that frees Christians to simply "enjoy one another's company" and be "glad to throw themselves into the upbuilding of community and the selflessness of fellowship." (Incarnational Ministry, pages 87-89)

I think, this is what is different now. And I can assure you, over the next few months and years, things will go wrong, or at the very least, they will not go as we planned or hoped. There will be some very strange turns, some flat out wrong ones, and the journey will no doubt be interesting, maybe harrowing for time to time, but always, if we pay attention, holy, God-revealing and good, because we are united in Christ and therefore one way or another, we will be together and Jesus will be with us and the Holy Spirit will not fail to guide us. This Truth remains the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow, and, ultimately, this truth is all that really matters, really matters.