



Character: The Most Important Thing

TEXT
Matthew 5:21–26

March 17, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

You know, the world is a bit crazy. I say it's crazy because we are both surprised and not surprised when a man avenges what he deems to be threats against the white race and shoots indiscriminately into mosques filled with people at prayer. The history of white people causing the suffering of people of color is long and brutal, and you would think that we would learn something from that. But we don't. We just pretend that these are isolated incidents caused by folks who don't have it all together. That narrative means we don't have to ask hard questions.

The world is a bit crazy. It feels sometimes like someone opened a door and all the grown-ups left the room. I hunger for folks to admire.

When I was in college, I listened to a musician named Mac McAnally. He wrote a song:

It's a crazy world but I live here.

If you can hear me singing so do you.

And I'm turning out my night light feeling satisfied,

that there's nothing anyone of us can do.

No there's nothing anyone of us can do.

I like McAnally, but I think he's wrong about this. When I turn out my night light, I think paying attention to the kind of people we are in this crazy world is what we need to do. That's why in these weeks that lead us to Good Friday and Easter Sunday, I want us to reflect a bit on spiritual maturity — or to use a more common word: character. David Brooks has recently said, most of us have clear strategies on how to achieve career success, but we have little plan for how to develop a profound character.¹ Character is not about success; it is about relationships — who we are with others.

We pay attention to character with children. Every report card I received in elementary school revealed that I had what my teachers called "citizenship issues." I know that comes as a surprise to you.

My mom told me, "You may not know how to spell or do your multiplication tables, but you can behave." Citizenship matters. She was right. But this is also true: Issues of character don't get easier as adults. We may be attentive to them as children, but I fear as adults, we just assume character will develop.

When we moved here, the Pastor Nominating Committee

asked us to send every picture we owned so they could find a few that were worth displaying to introduce the Ares to Village. My friend Priscilla, who was tasked with that job, recently discovered these old pics in a file and brought them to me. They included a photo of me that was taken the week I was born. My dad held me wrapped in a blanket. I looked at that photo with some amazement. Neither of us look like that anymore. Here's the truth: If you hang around this world for a bit, you are going to grow. Physically, we change and grow. It just happens. But growth in character doesn't just happen. It requires intention and discipline.

I would suggest that a needed discipline in developing a mature character is to know what matters most in life and what doesn't.

Jesus offers this teaching. He says if you are going to worship and bring your gift to the altar of God, you might assume that there is nothing more important. What could be more important than worship? Jesus says, nothing — unless you have injured someone, unless you have hurt someone, unless you have wronged someone — then it's more important that you do what you can to make it right.

Now there is so much in this text that we could discuss, but what I want to point out today is that Jesus teaches; we need to know what matters most.

When our kids were small, Carol was very careful about what they were allowed to watch on TV. They knew there were some shows they could watch and enjoy, but if Mom said, “No, those are bad shows,” well, don’t argue. You aren’t going to get to watch them.

My dad and his wife lived in town, and they would often watch the kids for us. (No one can question the grace of God when you have grandparents in the same zip code.) One time the kids stayed with them, and my Dad’s wife was away, so Dad was in charge. This was risky. When they came home, Nathan said, “Dad, Poppy let us watch some TV, and Dad, there were some bad parts, some really bad parts, Dad. And Dad, they were great!” Thanks, Poppy!

So here’s the thing. When we are trying to choose between the good and the bad, well that’s not so hard. That doesn’t require much character. What is more difficult is choosing between good and a greater good, bringing your gift to worship or paying attention to a broken relationship — both good, but what matters most?

I remember it like it was yesterday. I was in my first church, and I got a call late on a Friday night. She said, “Rev., my husband and I have been married for a year, and we need to talk.” It sounded serious.

I said, “Of course.”

She said, “Great, we will be at the church at 7:00.”

I thought, “In the morning? On Saturday? You know that I’m not a morning person.” In the kingdom of God, I think we will have morning maybe three days a week. I know we shouldn’t do away with them altogether, but having one every day is overdoing it a bit. Well, I set my alarm. On the way to the church, I stopped by Jiffy Mart to get a bucket of coffee.

When I arrived, they were waiting for me. She said, “We don’t seem to be that much alike.”

I said, “Tell me about it.”

“We have such different expectations of life.”

“Say more about that,” I said.

“Well, for example, we wake up on a Saturday. I say, ‘What would you like to do today? I was thinking we might work in the *yard* some this morning before it gets too hot. After we cut the *grass*, we could plant those *shrubs* I bought on Tuesday. Then we could come in, and you could hang the new *ceiling fan* in the den, while I’m at the *grocery store*, and then we could paint the *porch swing*. It’s a perfect day to clean out the *garage*. And when we have finished *paying the bills*, I thought we could drive out to the *beach* and take a long walk, find inner peace, and on the way back, we could stop for lunch. But that’s just me . . . what would you like to do today?’

“He says, ‘I was hoping to get some coffee.’”

“Coffee!” she says. “That’s it?”

“Well, it’s a start.”

“That’s all you want out of the day . . . just coffee?” “You see our problem, don’t you, Reverend?” I looked at my coffee.

So, here’s what you already know. You are going to give every minute of your life to good things. We are Presbyterian; it’s not in our DNA to waste our lives. No, you will give yourself to good things, but are you just giving your life to the good or to the greatest good? That requires character — a mature attention to relationships.

In his book *The Road to Character*, David Brooks says this: “I’ve been thinking about the difference between the and resumé virtues and the eulogy virtues. The resumé virtues are the ones you list on your resumé, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being — whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed.”²

I think he is on to something. The point is that resumé virtues and eulogy virtues, well they are both virtues. It’s not a matter of choosing between good and bad parts. A mature character requires that we know what matters most. To put it simply, it’s not enough to succeed. We are called to be good.

Knowing that, I imagine you reacted as I did to the revelations about the “Admissions Scandal,” or so it is

called. Some feel their children are more important than other people's children, so the rules don't apply to them. They have lots of money and are therefore entitled to a life of their choosing. A diploma is not a sign of education, it's just a transaction. They break the rules, they insult their own children. They succeed until they are caught, but they have missed the important things. It's not enough to succeed; you also have to be good.

We see it in sports, as top athletes find themselves in the press because of acts of violence. We despise violence, but if he can run fast or do magic with a ball, who they are as men matters less. This is about them, but it is also about us. It is about our desire to place our entertainment over matters of character.

This week, Christian faith in Prairie Village made national news. Not because of mission, but because once again a church becomes known for who they refuse to let in. And this time it is children who are told they are not welcome. The Archdiocese states, this kindergartener's parents, a gay couple, "cannot model behaviors ... regarding marriage and sexual morality consistent with ... the church's teaching."³ The irony of lifting up sexual morality is astonishing and makes every church look small. And yet, on Friday the *Star* reported while 2,000 have signed a letter of protest, 7,000 have signed a petition of support for the Archbishop's

position.⁴ When are we going to learn that a faithful witness to the love of Jesus Christ is revealed not in who we keep out, but in who we welcome?

It seems to me that they have forgotten what matters most. We all forget what matters most at times.

Jesus said, "Worship matters." The truth is, if you do not regularly come before God and remember the love that claims you by name, you will be lost. But the church is not Vegas. What happens in church is not supposed to stay in church. It's supposed to show up in how we treat others. Remembering that can sometimes be difficult, and practicing that can be challenging, but it is an important step in developing character. And that is the most important thing for us to do when the world is a bit crazy.

¹David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (2015), p. 11

²Ibid.

³*New York Times*, Sunday, March 10, 2019, "Catholic School Turns Child Away, and Faces Revolt"

⁴*Kansas City Star*, Friday, March 15, 2019, "7,000 Support Archdiocese Banning Kindergarten Child of Gay Parents"

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.