

What Counts

Micah 6: 6-8; Matthew 28: 16-20

Pittsburgh Presbytery

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Two scripture readings — together they're pretty expressive of the missio dei (the mission of God in Christ) but they are representative enough and I think they'll do. The first is Micah 6: 6 -8. Listen:

'With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before God with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'
God has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Then this classic passage also: Matthew 28: 16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, the risen Lord, they worshipped him; but doubted. Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

The word of the Lord

Thanks be to God.

Let's pray: Holy One, we ask that the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you. Really Lord, may what I say and what we think be used by you for your glory here in this piece of your church, Pittsburgh Presbytery. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

I titled this sermon, "What Counts" — I've had opportunity to wish I had found something better, but it's at least in the ballpark for what I want to say. What I want to talk about with us this morning is "what counts for us in Pittsburgh Presbytery at this time in our life and our ministry together as an expression of the body of Christ". Presbytery – a community of congregations participating together in the mission God gives in Christ. What counts for us at "this time"—at this time post PUP. At this time post Trinity paper. What counts for us?

It's a bit of a tumultuous time in many parts of the church I know. Interestingly enough, as much as the last General Assembly and its various actions loom very, very large for many of us, I want to remind you that for a lot of people this is like a ripple of water in Lake Erie — they just didn't notice. Judi, my colleague, told me that last night she was at one of our

small churches – they didn't talk at all about General Assembly or PUP. What they talked about was they are very, very few. When I preached there awhile ago, I talked with 18 of the 21 worshippers (we're talking a small church). Every single one of the 18 has a committed deep longing to reach the children of that marginalized community with the whole of the gospel of God in Christ – the love of God in Christ, the inclusion of God in Christ, the participation in worship of the people of God in Christ, the justice of God in Christ. You matter to somebody in a city that doesn't know you exist – in God in Christ. For them hanging on and finding some partners in ministry – that's what matters and that is what is occupying their time and attention.

However, the PUP stuff does matter, and it looms large. So I want to get some things "up and out" among us as the body of Christ. I want to say out loud some things that I am hearing that probably you are hearing and that I'm reading and that some of you are reading – some more avidly than others I must say. Just to make sure that we the body are hearing the kind of stuff that is being said. I'm not going to cite any sources. I'm not going to quote any articles, I'm just going to tell you in summary the kind of stuff I'm hearing that maybe you are hearing too.

Some folks deeply hope that PUP offers a way out of the deadlock that has gripped our denomination over ordination standards about gay and lesbian pastors, elders, and deacons for at least 30 years, that maybe PUP will be a way to break that deadlock and have something new come into being. A lot of people hope that.

Some Presbyterian's hope that PUP is the first step in achieving full justice for gay and lesbian people in the Presbyterian Church.

Some people worry that this is really the first step on a slippery slope to doing away with the ordination standards that require fidelity in marriage and chastity outside of it for all of the officers of PC (USA).

A few have said that they think that the PUP action (Peace Unity and Purity proposals) opens the door for errant sessions and presbyteries to ordain *anybody* at all — including people involved in incest or even pedophilia. Other people are *incensed* that anybody would say that.

Some are frustrated that the General Assembly and all the denomination's considerable powers of persuasion, influence and manipulation have yet again betrayed gay and lesbian people by caving in to the culture and to the middle of the church.

Other people really feel and worry that, believe that, the considerable power, influence, machinations, manipulation of the General Assembly staff and machinery have imposed PUP on the church and found a way to get it through, one way or another, and to get past presbyteries and their ability to interact with these materials.

Some I think, are kind of relieved, saying something akin to, "Well they've finally done it. Finally, it's crystal clear. Between the PUP stuff and the Trinity paper, it's finally clear that it's time to leave this denomination."

By the way, some of the youngest among us don't quite see what the storm is all about. If you read the Emergent Church literature, you will see that the Emergent Church movement pays scant attention to these issues that have really and truly been tremendously powerful in the Presbyterian Church (USA) for 30 years. They just pay scant attention to it, it's just not hardly on their radar. And by the way, I'm not advocating that, I'm just telling you, that's what is.

Now attached to all the hopes, frustrations, fears and disappointments are some issues of schism and property. And that's hotly being talked about in some quarters of our presbytery from a variety of points of view – of course, we are Presbyterians.

Some worry, painfully, that all of this is moving us inevitably towards a schism of some form or another – and some people among us are broken-hearted about that.

Some are just confused.

Some are relieved.

Some are saying something akin to this: “Aha! At last, a chance to really stick it to those traitors who want to leave the PC (USA) and take their property with them. Now we’ve got them!”

On the other hand, one pastor said to me: “You know, it just seems to me, if a congregation wants to leave the Presbyterian Church USA, we probably ought to give their property to them, and give them some extra money to help them get on with their mission and make a fresh start in it, and throw a celebration that we all come to and enjoy thinking about what could happen in the kingdom because of that and then tell them we’re going to be praying for them and ask them to pray for us.”

Another pastor basically said to me, “Over my dead body will *any* church leave this presbytery with its property.”

Some have talked about some kind of a negotiation: “Ten cents on the dollar of assessed property value”, or “two years of per capita to kind of help the presbytery over the hump of the loss of income” or “\$1,000 per member”, or “\$500 per member”, or . . . pick a number.

Some have said, “What needs to happen in the denomination is that 1,100 churches on the exact same day go to their presbytery with a solid document asking to leave the denomination and take their property with them.” No question: if 1,100 churches did that, it would be more than a ripple on Lake Erie.

Some larger churches, not in our presbytery, have contemplated the benefits of having a very large indebtedness, knowing that their small presbytery couldn’t possibly assume responsibility for the millions of dollars that they owe on their property. Once again, not in our presbytery.

Some congregations, some pastors are thinking about, maybe even hoping that there will be the possibility of having a presbytery send their congregation with its property to the African denomination, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. This year, the PCEA formed a presbytery in the United States — precisely for that purpose. And it is actually technically legal, probably, for a church to be dismissed to that denomination with its property.

Some of the scuttlebutt among Executive Presbyters, my colleagues, recalls what happened the last time our church went through a somewhat informal schism in the 1980s with the reunification of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the PCUS, the northern and southern churches. Two Presbytery’s experiences in the south have become legendary among my colleagues —

In one presbytery in the South, the presbytery tries to be conciliatory and open and permission-giving, and honoring of all of the churches, and the effect of that was that a large number of churches in that presbytery left — more than 20%, I think.

The EP’s from the south tell that at that time in Florida, another presbytery took a very hard-line stance and just decided nobody would leave without a fight – they fought every single property issue and not a single church left the presbytery.

The question is which one of those do you think is good? or do you think either of them?

My own observation across the years, and I've watched this for most of my ministry, but I only have a handful of experiences, is that when a presbytery awards property to a small minority that is loyal to the denomination, and a majority of the congregation leaves, the predictable outcome is that after 5 or 6 or 10 years, the group that left has gotten larger, maybe doubled and the loyal minority that stayed has gotten smaller, and less able to move forward in mission, less able to take care of property. You can make of that what you will, it's just an observation of what I have experienced and watched – I know of not a single exception to that. If you do know I'd like to hear it, please.

Well, it's something of a sampling of what "some people" are saying.

What are *you* saying?

A bit later we're going to ask you to say some things to somebody else in the presbytery about your hopes and concerns about the PUP report and its implications for the church, and what your church is doing in response to PUP and what PUP's impact will be on your congregation or what it already is. And we'll ask you to talk a little bit about how you hope Pittsburgh Presbytery deals with all of the issues surrounding PUP.

Carol Divens Roth, our moderator and I have hosted one conversation on the Peace Unity and Purity actions, and when we hosted the last one in mid-August, a friend in the presbytery asked me a good, very pointed but fair question: "Jim, how will you lead during this time?" Notice that he didn't ask: "What are you going to make the presbytery to do?" — he knows better than that – I'm not the presbytery, but he does know that how I lead and the staff leads and moderators of presbytery and chairs of council and stated clerks, how we lead will in fact matter. So I will tell you how I will work, what I am working on, and if you hate it, let the council know – I report to them.

What counts with me is what has always counted with me in the 25 years of ministry before I came to Pittsburgh, every single year while I have been here and will count with me when God sends me somewhere else:

My first loyalty is to the mission God gives in Christ and empowers by the Spirit. It may not seem like an answer, but it is.

I have put that mission ahead of myself, ahead of my family, ahead of where I live and where I serve, it's that mission that matters most to me. My first loyalty will be to that, I put that ahead of the affirmation of others.

What counts with me is this Presbytery's mission to serve its congregations. You voted that in 10 years ago. Someday you'll vote a different one in. But for now it is what you said the mission was.

Pittsburgh Presbytery's mission is to serve its congregations so they are healthy and vital — with three signs of health and vitality:

success in bringing others to Christ

vibrant worship (and by the by, we don't mean contemporary worship – we mean worship in whatever style, where people expect God to show up and do something among God's obedient, willing people) Vibrant worship and,

active participation in the mission of Christ's church. The mission of Christ's church: evangelism, disciplinmaking, compassion and justice – you can't take one of those out. Can you? Active participation in the mission of Christ's church.

Here's why our mission to our congregations matters to me: In the bounds of Pittsburgh Presbytery are somewhere around 143 communities. And around the edges of our presbytery are communities that our churches have influence and responsibility in. So how many communities is that? Well its more than 143. In every one of those communities are people who need the love and the justice of Jesus Christ. Every one of those communities, every one of them, is kind of a system that shapes its members and their hopes and their dreams and their lives and their

families and their understanding of who they are and whether they matter to anybody. The love and justice of God in Christ in all of those however many 150 or more communities, matters.

It matters in poor, marginalized communities that nobody else notices and that the Mainlines have never effectively reached. Oh, we've gone and done justice there. Actually we don't do justice. We go and do compassion there. This presbytery is committed, at least your staff and I think you too, to learning to take the whole of the gospel to those communities because if nobody else cares about them. We know God does, and we want them to know God does because we do.

Urban, old communities matter to God in Christ.
Suburban, new communities matter to God in Christ.
Professional, privileged communities matter to God in Christ.

In each one of those communities, whether they are poor or rich, marginalized or powerful, people are caught in systems that take life away as God intended it. We think every one of those communities needs the gospel in its entirety. We think they need know the message of Jesus – the reign of God is nearby. And that's good news.

Because those communities matter and count to God, they matter and *count* to us. Our congregations matter to us. What counts is congregations taking the whole of the gospel into those communities with particular focus among the unchurched. If you want to know where God is and what God is doing in the world, get out among the unchurched. We form disciples *in* the church for the sake of those *out* who need the whole of the gospel.

Evangelism, making disciples, *doing* compassion, *doing* justice: that's what counts.

Placing pastors in churches that will help them bear *that* kind of missional fruit – that's what we're about. Shaping the ground, so that if you placed a misisonal pastor in a church, the church will be glad to have that pastor there instead of finding a way to get rid of that pastor; holding pastors accountable to help their church matter in their community, that's what our ministry is as a presbytery. Finding ways to create partnerships between little churches with marginal resources who have a heart for their community; finding partnerships that will bring the resources of the body to bear in those communities – that's what we're about. That's what counts with us. If you want something else to count, you'll have to say so. But until we hear something different, that's what we're going to be doing. That takes all of our time, and then some.

Which is to say this, beloved: as important as the General Assembly actions on PUP are, and as much as they impact some of the churches, and as much as we are facing potential schism or at least some churches that will want to leave with their property, as important as all of that is, and it is! As precious as the pastors and the elders and the members of those churches are, to me if not to everybody, PUP will not have first priority on my time, or on the leadership of this presbytery's time. It will take a bunch of our time – Carol and I have spent a lot of time on this, and some sleepless nights for me anyway, leading up to the last PUP conversation – sure didn't want to goof it up, you know!

Living in response to the actions of the General Assembly has never been first with me in my ministry. Although I know it is first for some of you, and for some of you, that's a calling, and that's ok. But it's not first in this presbytery. I pray that you will make the mission of God in Christ first in your church and in your ministry as well.

If you are planning to leave – if you feel that God is calling you to leave, and you know God may really be calling some of the churches in our presbytery to leave, the question is: under what circumstances? But if you really believe that, if that really in the end gets confirmed as the Spirit's leading, ok then. The body needs to figure out how we're going to respond to that. If you really feel called to leave, ok then. Keep focusing on the mission to reach the people in your community with the whole of the gospel. If you really feel called to stay, if that's what the Spirit has laid on your heart – if you just never occurred to you to leave – ok – stay. I'll be glad. But please remember this – this is my plea to you. *Staying in the PC (USA) is not a mission. Leaving isn't a mission.* Reaching people with the whole of the gospel around your church – *that's* a mission.

If you wish everybody would just stop bickering about all of this stuff — *that's not a mission* either.

The mission God gives in Christ counts more to me than holding the church together — although I don't know many people who have prayed more about it and pled more with God about that, or been irritated with God as much as I. I have wept about that. Are you praying for your church? Please?

God's mission counts more than striving to be an ideal community in the Presbyterian Church, including Pittsburgh Presbytery. God's mission counts more than trying to be *perfect* peace, *perfect* unity, and *perfect* purity. I know of no church with perfect peace, unity and purity, and there is not a single biblical example of it. The model is Matthew 28. Read the letters again and see if this isn't what holds forever:

Eleven, not twelve, (twelve is a good number, what the heck is eleven?) Eleven *doubting* worshippers are gathered by Jesus in Galilee after the resurrection, and they are not perfect. But, by the *power* of the Holy Spirit, (I'm thinking John chapter 3 here: you must be born from the Spirit – by the power of the Holy Spirit) what they are is – enough.

You can expect that we will make the mission first, unless you tell me to do something else.

Second, you can expect that I will work at process, not outcomes, so much. Well, probably process way more than outcomes. I learned from a friend you can probably influence process or outcomes, but probably not both. Process is the better choice and I'll tell you why it is the better choice in this instance, in my heart. Again, if you think differently, I'll learn.

You are the presbytery; I'm your pastor. My job is to help *you* find and do the will of God in Christ by the power of the Spirit. That is why we are having conversations about this. I and the staff and the moderators and the chairs are listening. We are listening to you talk, listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit *in you, through you*. Our job is to make sure you keep talking. Not because talking is everything, but because the Holy Spirit has promised the Spirit of Jesus is present among his people. And I'm listening for you to talk and to find your way through this. When things begin to become clear among you, I'll lead again, in moving that forward.

Here are some of the things that we heard in the first PUP gathering that Carol and I hosted:

"We hope for a cease fire – stop vilifying each other", somebody said.

Somebody else said, "Don't demonize the other side." I'm asking you in the name of Jesus, don't demonize the other side. The people on the other side belong to Jesus. If you knew them well, you would know they are sisters and brothers in Christ. That doesn't mean some of us might not be called to leave and some to stay.

"Presume", somebody said, "that all are working in good faith." Most of us are working in good faith most of the time, if we're not, let's hold each other accountable. But presume that all are working in good faith.

"We need do to act", somebody said, "with humility and listen to God's will for all of us." Be prayerful during this time. If this is just a ripple on Lake Erie for you, good! Pray for the rest of us. It's more than a ripple in my ministry.

"Be willing to talk to each other outside the civil courts – be a witness to the secular world." I'd like that.

"Listen to what God has to tell us."

"Pray that the process is fair and not destructive, be willing to be accountable in the body."

"Seek to care for folks on the other side of the issue from you."

How do you hope we will deal with this? Those are what some of us have said. What do you hope for? We'll ask you in a bit.

What do you want to count in Pittsburgh Presbytery in this time? In the end, beloved, you are the ones who vote. You are the ones who will make the decisions. Stay prayerful. As your leaders lead, we will be keeping our mission first and foremost, even while we deal with important PUP issues. Our mission to our congregations for the sake of the gospel and communities will be first. And we will try to guide and shape the work of the body, the presbytery, so that in the end, the Lord of the church says, "Hmm, that was about right – wasn't perfect, but was about right." I'm hoping that at the end of it all, most of us will say, "You know, it was about right. What we did, how we did it, wasn't perfect, but it was about right."

The Lord is with us. Amen