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Philip A. Muth

"MAKING LIFE COUNT"

TEXT: Romans 12:1-8 "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given us, let us use them."

We may express it in a great many different ways, but all people need to feel that somehow their lives make a difference, that their existence matters. We can see that in the young child who will do almost anything, good or bad -- even if it means a spanking -- just to be noticed. We see it in the teenager who conforms, sometimes slavishly to the fads of the day in order to be "one of the gang." We see it in career people, including homemakers, who invest so much of themselves in their work that, as Picasso said, "They wind up becoming their work" and experience pain, or even panic at the thought of retirement. Even after death, we see it in the exorbitant ways through which people sometimes seek to commemorate either their own lives or those of loved ones.

The simple truth is that all of us have a kind of "hunger" to feel that we count. To believe that, when we are gone, it will have made some difference to someone that we were here. If we can't believe that, then we are almost literally "nobody", and life has no meaning. For most people, such a thought is unbearable, and mental health workers frequently find themselves working with those whose underlying problem is their fear that they are unneeded, unwanted, and unworthy. In fact, Carl Jung actually defined neurosis as "the suffering of the soul that has not found its meaning." And Viktor Frankl developed a whole school of psychotherapy to deal with what he calls existential frustration-- the despair over a meaningless life, and a lack of knowledge as to what makes life worth living.

Unfortunately, many people today are finding it harder and harder to feel that they matter. The size of the universe, the sheer size of the world's population, the complexity of life today, and the growing tendency on the part of others, if not ourselves, to think of us as numbers rather than as names, all make us feel more and more like little cogs in a huge machine or, at best, like ants in a giant ant farm. I remember being fascinated as a boy by one of those gadgets. It was just a thin wooden box with a glass front, filled with dirt and with a small colony of ants. Inside the box, the ants busily did all the things that ants are supposed to do, but for what purpose? Well, sometimes it's like that with people. We're busy enough, all right, but to what purpose? When all is said and done, will it matter that we were here -- or not.

The need, then, is to feel that we count. And the problem is that more and more people today have little confidence that they do. But what's the answer? No doubt there are many, some better than others, but one that helps me is contained in this morning's scripture lesson. Those eight verses tell us three things we need to know in order to make life count.

First of all, they tell us that we are Somebody. We are not nonentities. We are not unneeded or unimportant. For whether we realize it or not, we are gifted. Each of us has some talent or ability that makes us useful and necessary human beings. I'm sure most of you remember Jesus' parable of the talents. He said, "For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, each according to his ability." The talents differed, just as ours do, but everyone had at least one.

In the same way, St. Paul wrote, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us. . . ." He didn't say, "If we have gifts" or "Those of you who do have gifts." He assumed that each of us has some talent, given us by the grace of God. The problem is that too often the one and two talent people look at the five talent people and put themselves down. Because they may not be five talent people, they fail to recognize and appreciate the talents they do have.

There is an old Spanish proverb that says "When God wants something done, a baby is born." Well, I'd like to turn that around and say, "Whenever a baby is born, God has some purpose in mind. When you were born, God had some purpose in mind." And whether that purpose was something relatively simple and little noticed or the kind of thing that makes the newspaper headlines and the evening news, that makes you important.

Secondly, this verse tells us not only that we are somebody but that we are unique somebodies. It says, "Having gifts that differ . . ." We are like the various organs of the body which, though they are one body, do not all have the same function. And one of the worst mistakes anyone can ever make is to try to be somebody else. First, because you can never really be a good someone else. And second, because as long as you're trying to be someone else, you can't even be a good you. You can't be that person God wants you to be and needs you to be, the only person you can really be happy being.

When I was a boy, growing up in St. Louis, I would sometimes go down to Sportsman's Park to watch the Cardinals play baseball. During those years the very best hitter in the National League was Stan "The Man" Musial. Year after year, he was at, or near, the top of the league in almost every hitting category. And I imagine it must have been very tempting for budding young ball players to try to imitate him. But no one ever could. Musial had a unique coiled-up stance that would have been laughable except that it worked so well for him. But to this day, I have never seen anyone else who could use it. Musial probably wouldn't have been a great hitter if he had tried to imitate Babe Ruth, and Hank Aaron and Willie Mays couldn't have done what they did if they had tried to imitate Musial. "Having gifts that differ according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them." If you want to make life count, don't try to be an imitation of somebody else. Concentrate instead on being the best you that you can be.

But that is easier said than done. In order to be the best me that I can be, I first have to find out who I am. Before we can use the gifts that God has given us, we have to do two things. We have to discover what they are and how to use them. Neither one happens automatically. When I said a few moments ago that each of us has some gift that God needs, some of you may have thought to yourselves, "I sure wish someone would tell me what it is." Certainly it's not unusual for people to think they have no talent at all or, at least, to be completely unaware of some ability that seems perfectly obvious to others. I don't suppose there are any fool-proof ways to discover what your gifts are, but you might start by asking a friend, or by taking a close look at what you enjoy doing, or by thinking about the things you have done well in the past. But however you do it, to use a talent to its best advantage, you have to know you have it.

You also have to work at it. Some people may have so much talent that they don't need to practice, but there certainly aren't many of them. One of my favorite stories is about the young man who said to a famous opera singer, "Oh, Maestro, I would give anything if I could sing the way you do." Now this particular singer was a tenor, and we tenors are a little different. So, instead of just saying "Thank you", he replied, "Would you give eight hours a day, seven days a week, for thirty years? That's what it cost me." And even the great Paderewski, at the height of his illustrious career, is alleged to have said, "If I go without practicing for only one day, I can tell the difference." Viktor Frankl speaks of self-realization as the process of "detecting" the self in its true dimensions. One way we do that is by identifying our own specific gifts, then developing them to maturity by using them.

But use them for what? Those ants in the ant farm were using their abilities, too. But, isolated as they were from the real world, one might well question what real purpose they served. Once again our passage from Romans speaks to the issue. It says, "I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God to present your bodies (that is, your whole physical existence) as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." In other words, our real worship of God is not just what we do and say here on Sunday morning. It is everything we do, no matter how ordinary or how secular, every day and everywhere. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Here, then, is one way to make life count: to see everything we do, everything we say, as an act of worship. Viewed in that light, nothing is secular, nothing is unimportant, and nothing is meaningless. Some of the things we do may be very ordinary. Many will not have any very impressive visible consequences. But that doesn't matter. If we offer every thought, every word, every action as our gift to God, we can trust Him to make good use of them. And, if we try to discover the gifts He has given us, if we conscientiously develop them, and diligently use them for His glory, how can we not have meaning?

One of the lessons I learned from playing football was that it didn't really matter who made the headlines or who got the glory. The game was generally won or lost in that unglamorous and often overlooked struggle between the lines. So it is with life. If we use our God-given gifts to His glory, we are important whether the world notices us or not. "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them."