

***BALANCING I MATTER, YOU MATTER,  
WE MATTER, OTHERS MATTER***  
Proverbs 8: 1-12

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Recently, as I was driving through Austin, I saw a big hand-painted sign that said: you matter.

You matter.

Sometimes, these are the words that someone really needs to hear: you matter.

And sometimes, someone really needs to express them in the first person: I matter.

In fact, we often say you matter to someone, through words or deeds, with the hope that the person will think or feel, yes, I matter. To say you matter to a person who thinks or feels, I don't matter, might change that person's life in significant ways for the better.

I don't matter: what a horrible thought or feeling to have.

To think, I don't matter. To feel, I don't matter.

Some people are told you don't matter, and they're treated in ways that communicate, loud and clear, you don't matter. So they internalize that message, they come to believe: I don't matter.

To actually believe I don't matter is to live in hell. Hell is a place where I don't matter.

I think a lot of people live in that hell today. I think a lot of people think and feel: I don't matter.

Or if they don't live in that hell, they at least experience that hell to some degree every now and then.

Someone says something to them or about them, someone treats them a certain way, and they think, they feel: I don't matter. And they get angry, or feel like crying. Maybe withdraw, or lash out.

I grew up believing: I don't matter.

I was told: you don't matter.

So I believed it was true: I don't matter.

And I was angry, I felt like crying. I withdrew, and lashed out.

So I know what it's like to live in that particular hell.

It took me a long time to find a path, and some people, to lead me out of that hell. But, thank God, I did. Though I slip back into it to some degree every now and then.

One thing that helped me leave that hell was hearing other people say to me, with words and deeds: you matter. Those words and deeds were lifesavers. Over time, they changed my life in significant ways for the better.

So the words you matter have a special place in my heart. I can attest to the healing power those words can have.

Yet, when I saw you matter on that sign recently, it bugged me. Something about it didn't sit right with me.

I've been reflecting lately on the role healthy and wholesome communities play in nurturing the growth of healthy and wholesome individuals, and the role healthy and wholesome individuals play in nurturing the well-being of the communities that support them.

It's a two-way commitment of mutual aid and support. A covenant relationship.

Healthy, wholesome, flourishing communities nurturing the growth of healthy, wholesome, flourishing individuals. Healthy, wholesome, flourishing individuals nurturing the health and well-being of the communities supporting them.

So with that on my mind, the phrase you matter struck me as incomplete. As unbalanced.

And, immediately upon reading you matter, another phrase spontaneously popped into my mind in response: and we matter too.

You matter. And we matter too.

Each individual matters. And the community—the *we*—matters too.

Another type of hell in which people can live is the one in which they believe I matter but other people don't matter. I matter but you don't matter.

Or a more nihilistic hell with even more suffering: I don't matter, and neither does anyone else. I don't matter, and neither do you.

Pity the people who live in those hells, or least experience those hells to some degree every now and then.

I know those hells from the inside as well. A preoccupation with me, and a blindness towards others, or a disinterest in others, or a lack of empathy for others, or a prejudice against others.

I don't live in those hells anymore, but I slip back into them to some degree every now and then.

One thing that helps to prevent me from slipping into a preoccupation with me is to hear other people say: we matter too.

Yes, you matter, Tom. And we matter to.

The trick is finding the healthy balance between you matter, and we matter too. Between I matter, and others matter too.

It seems to me that one characteristic of a healthy, wholesome, mature human, a wise human, is the ability to strike a just and righteous balance in one's life between I matter, you matter, we matter, and others matter.

I think a wise person knows in one's mind, in one's heart, and to the core of one's being that I matter, you matter, we matter, and others matter. And through commitment and continuous practice over time, the wise person develops some skill and proficiency at striking a just and righteous balance between I, you, we, and others.

The attainment of this wisdom is a spiritual practice.

And it's not easy to attain. It takes commitment and continuous practice over time.

If hell is where I don't matter, or I'm the only one who matters, and others don't matter, then heaven is where I matter, you matter, we matter, and all others matter.

Heaven is where everyone matters, and everyone knows that everyone else matters, and everyone lives their life according to that knowledge.

Heaven is where the covenant between communities and individuals is forged in each person's heart, mind, and soul, and renewed daily. Where every day, communities and individuals mutually support one another's health, well-being, and flourishing.

Heaven is where every child is raised, and taught, and learns, how to strike a just and righteous balance between I, you, we, and others.

Jesus called this way of life the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God.

A way of living, embodied by Jesus himself, where communities and individuals embody holy and sacred wisdom. Divine wisdom. And live in peace.

We live our lives in a complicated world, a world in which we live, and move, and have our being enmeshed within so many complex relationships, with so many people, and with so many other-than-human life forms that inhabit this earth with us.

Relationships that range from the intimate, to the local, to the global in scope.

Relationships we often scarcely notice or consciously acknowledge because we're enmeshed in so many of them, we can't pay attention to all of them, though we could pay attention to more of them.

In a world as complex and interrelated as the one we inhabit, it's incredibly challenging to strike a just and righteous balance between I matter, you matter, we matter, and all others matter.

And we don't strike that balance.

We don't live in heaven, that optimal just and righteous balance between me, and you, and everyone else. There's much that's out-of-balance in our way of living on this earth, in our relationships with others.

We humans have not yet attained the sacred and holy wisdom, the divine wisdom, that's required to strike the just and righteous balance in all of our relationships.

We have not yet attained the heart knowledge, the head knowledge, and the soul knowledge, that's required to live together in a covenant of peace.

Yet this covenant of peace is our vision. It's our dream—human beings with the spiritual capacity, with the wisdom, with the heart, head, and soul knowledge, to strike a just and righteous balance between me, and you, and all others.

But striking this balance won't just magically happen. And I don't believe that God will just snap God's fingers to make it happen one day, or that Jesus will return from on high to make it happen one day.

To realize our dream, to embody this way of life, we humans have to want it, more than we want anything else on this earth.

We have to value and desire this holy and sacred wisdom, this divine wisdom, more than we value and desire anything else on this earth.

And we will not attain it, unless we do, and until we do.

So may we as a church—as disciples of the one who embodied and revealed divine wisdom, as disciples of the one who embodied and revealed the way of heaven in his life—may we as a church commit ourselves to attaining this wisdom and practicing the way of heaven in our lives.

May we desire to be, and commit ourselves to be, a community that's committed to nurturing one another's health, well-being, and attainment of divine wisdom, and may we commit ourselves to be individuals that are committed to nurturing the health, well-being, and wisdom of our church community.

And as a church community, may we commit ourselves to nurturing others in our world who are told you don't matter, be they homeless people, hungry people, asylum seekers from Central America and the Congo, and all other people who for whatever reason have come to think or feel: I don't matter.

May we, who matter to one another, tell them: you matter to us.

Because sometimes, these are the words that someone really needs to hear.