

“Food for the Journey: Purpose” GPPC 8-7-16
Micah 6:8, Matthew 22:34-40, Matthew 28:16-20

This is the last sermon in our five-part summer sermon series “Food for the Journey.” With the overarching metaphor of life as a spiritual journey, over these last five Sundays Jo and I have lifted up some of the nourishing food God offers us with worship, community, prayer, Scripture, and today, purpose.

What is our purpose in life? A woman once told writer Annie Dillard, “Seem like we’re just set down here and don’t nobody know why.” (Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 2.)

A character in a short story despairs because he has “a feeling that any one thing in this life is almost as worth doing as any other.” (John McGahern, “The Recruiting Officer” in *The Substance of Things Hoped For*, 219.)

Presbyterian writer Kathleen Norris reflects on the 1999 Columbine High School massacre committed by two teenage boys. She says, “A student who had considered himself a friend of the pair said in an interview that as awful as their action was, he couldn’t help feeling that ‘they finally did something.’” (Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & Me*, 118.)

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“They finally did something.”

We live in a time when people are confused about the purpose of life. If life is not merely about doing whatever I please, then what’s it about? If life is not about being famous, or heaven forbid, infamous, what’s it about? If life is not just about making money or getting more stuff or being popular or being powerful, then what’s it about?

God. Life is about God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says, the “chief end of [humanity] is to glorify [God] and enjoy [God] forever.” Each one of us has been called into being so that we might glorify God and find joy in God forever.

We are meant to find joy in God forever. So when each of us thinks about his or her purpose in life Frederick Buechner says we can apply a two-part litmus test. If it’s truly our purpose (or calling) in life (1) It should be something significant that the world needs. (2) It should be something we find joy in doing. And I’m going to add a third criterion. It should also be something we have gifts to do.

So maybe when you’ve headed off to college you could think about your purpose as you do your coursework or even after you

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graduate. 1. Does the work seem important, something that makes God's world a better place? 2. Do you find it joyful and fulfilling? 3. You don't have to be the best in the world, but do you actually have some gifts to do the work? When all three of these criteria line up, you may have found part of your purpose.

Of course, how we live out our purpose in life often changes over the years. Our views, gifts, and passions change. What does it look like to live out our purpose in retirement? Or in parenthood? Or in middle age?

We are meant to enjoy God forever. That's part of our purpose.

We are also meant to glorify God. The Hebrew word we translate as glorify means to "make heavy" or "weighty," and it means to "honor." We've heard the expressions. "She wasn't a lightweight. Her words were weighty. They had gravitas about them." In 70s lingo, "That's heavy, man." To glorify carries the sense of taking God seriously. It means we see God and God's will as significant, not an afterthought or something just reserved for Sunday mornings (if even then). Our purpose in life, our reason for existence is to glorify God.

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And we glorify God when we take God and God's will for the world and for us seriously.

Scripture suggests there are clear ways to do that. The Prophet Micah says, "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Notice the language. Micah does not say, "And what does the Lord offer you as one attractive option in your spiritual cafeteria?" No. He says, "What does the Lord *require* of you..." "What does the Lord *demand* of you..." The language is rigid because of a repeated pattern in ancient Israel, a pattern God addressed over and over through the various Old Testament prophets.

Here's how it went. Israel would say, "Look at us, Lord! We're doing great. We've got this fantastic worship service going. The worship space is gorgeous. The language is eloquent. We've got special musicians out of Eastman, Julliard, and Boston Conservatory. Everything is beautiful. People are praying up a storm to you. Folks are swooning in the aisles. Can you see us, Lord? Aren't you pleased?" And over and over through the prophets God would say, "No. I'm not

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pleased. Your worship doesn't mean a thing to me if you aren't also practicing justice and kindness and mercy. Your prayers are just noise if you aren't also helping your needy neighbors.” (See Amos 5:21-24)

Of course, when God starts talking about justice (as God does about a zillion times in the Bible—look it up) we feel uneasy. What's this going to cost us? Is God going to start poking around my life again? Who wants to hear God talking about justice? In fact, a few years ago a TV personality advised his listeners to abandon any congregation that talked about justice or mentioned justice on its website. To hear him tell it, justice was some sort of diabolical communist plot.

But that's not what the Bible means by justice. To put it in the most simple terms, Scripture views justice as treating other people fairly because that's what God expects us to do out of love. As Jesus puts it, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” God commanded Israel not only to practice justice individually but as a society, always constructing and enforcing laws to protect the weakest and most vulnerable people in the social order. Israel

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is always to side with the underdog, because God always sides with the underdog.

Presbyterians in particular have always believed that too. Our forebear in the faith, John Calvin, emphasized that we should not spend our time on earth worrying about whether we're going to heaven or not. Instead, we should trust in God's grace in Christ and then bring glory to God in our worship and in our service to make the world a better place. So we do mission feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, visiting the lonely, healing the sick. And we speak and act for justice.

Back in 1958 our national denomination made a statement. It said, the church cannot "be neutral or indifferent toward evil in the world... [we have a] responsibility to speak on social and moral issues for the encouragement and instruction of the Church and its members... not only to encourage and train their members in daily obedience to God's will, but corporately to reveal God's grace in places of suffering and need, to resist the forces that tyrannize, and to support the forces that restore the dignity of all [people] as the children of God, for only so is

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the gospel most fully proclaimed; ...” (General Assembly, 1958 Statement–PC(USA), p. 537)

So throughout history, the church has taken *public* stances and sermons in worship have addressed justice issues *specifically* not in easy generalities. We’ve taken on slavery, child labor, fair wages, women’s rights, the rights of African-Americans, apartheid, nuclear disarmament, the rights of our LGBT brothers and sisters, poverty, environmental justice, and the list goes on. Is it easy? No. Speaking and acting for justice is hard, because of resistance outside and inside the church. Are we always right? No. But we do our best to know Scripture, engage in dialogue, learn about the issues, and to discern the mind of Christ. And we repent when we discover our errors. As God commands we are “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.”

But this is still not our only purpose in life. At the end of Matthew’s gospel, we see the resurrected Jesus as he appears before the eleven remaining disciples. Judas has already betrayed Jesus and died. And these leftover disciples all ran away when the cross came into the picture. But as flawed as they are, and as flawed as we are, they’ve

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shown up, and so have we. Not to be chastised, but to be fed yet again by the living Christ.

Notice what happens when the disciples see Jesus. First, they worship, though some doubt. Then Jesus gives them a very brief final sermon. Or we might just call it a charge and blessing given at the end of worship. He says, “All authority, all power has been given me. So go and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them. And teach them to obey everything I’ve commanded you. And remember, I’m always with you forever.”

So another part of our life’s purpose is to worship the God we know in Jesus Christ, and to make disciples of Christ as we baptize and teach, remembering that Christ is with us all the time.

Of course, this message is counter-cultural and counter to what many believers claim too, isn’t it? We’re told that worship and being an active disciple, a follower of Christ in a church is not only unnecessary but it’s foolish. Better to be spiritual on our own without all the irritation of a faith community where we might be not only comforted but also

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challenged. Better to avoid hearing things we might disagree with and having to love people who get on our nerves.

But someone put it this way, “In close to twenty years as a pastor, I have yet to meet an individual who is growing in Christ apart from a congregation. ‘Christ is the head of the body, the church’ (Col. 1:18), [and] we figuratively decapitate our relationship to Christ if we’re serious about separation. [The Reformer] Martin Luther was once asked if it was possible to be a Christian without the church. Martin was sitting in front of a winter fire with friends when the question was asked. He wordlessly got up, grabbed the hot coal with the fireplace tongs and placed the glowing ember in front of them. They watched the coal slowly lose its glow until it finally went out. Back in the fire, it burned hot. Luther sat down and answered the question without speaking.” (Frank G. Honeycutt, *Preaching For Adult Conversion and Commitment: Invitation To A Life Transformed*, 142.)

Being Christian is not something we do by ourselves; it is something we do as regular part of a congregation. So not only are you

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and I nurtured and challenged in the church, but our purpose in life is to nurture and challenge other people to follow Christ through the church.

And we've come full circle, haven't we? Our food for the spiritual journey of life is worship, community, prayer, Scripture, and purpose.

You high school graduates are ready to head off on your adventure. We're proud of you and we love you. Over the decades we've seen dozens of young people go out the doors of the church, but taking the church with them. Their experiences from Sunday School, youth group, mission trips, Massanetta and Montreat, worship, and study, and fellowship went with them. We've seen them go out the doors and somehow, by some miracle it has shaped their lives. We've seen young people do work that makes the world a better place. We've seen them volunteer in their churches and communities. Why? Because they know the purpose of their lives is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

Each and every life is precious, and God means for us to use our lives wisely. So our hope is that each of us--young, old, and in the middle--will try to glorify God with our life in a vibrant community of

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faith. We'll worship, pray, read Scripture, and work to make the world a better place. What's our purpose in life? To glorify God and enjoy God forever. Who could ask for more? Amen. ©Jeff Paschal