

WHY WE GATHER
Finding Purpose

“Scripture and the Power of Personal Story”
(2 Corinthians 3:1-6)

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Introduction

1. This last week a Facebook group set up to connect the Interlochen High School graduating class of 1986 posted the following photo:



The group started tagging everyone they thought they recognized and, in case you don't recognize me, I am the young man in the center looking like he is having an existential moment of reflection, probably starting to wonder, "will I have any hair thirty-one years from now?" (No, you will not Dan!)

Thirty-one years! I'm having a hard time getting my mind wrapped around that because I remember the day the photo was taken very clearly, even the burgundy penny-loaf shoes I was wearing. And as I look back, fully recognizing the fact that the field of study that I was pursuing at the time (and paid a lot of money for a college degree to further as well) would not ultimately be my professional career, I consider this photo a good memory to me. It is a good memory because graduating from high school felt like both an accomplishment and a threshold tethered together by a true sense of purpose.

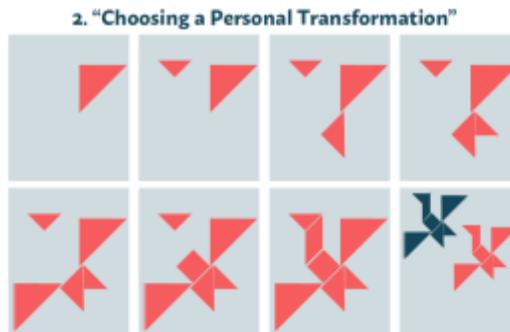
It doesn't matter that my vocational path has been greatly refined since then, and that I didn't know what I was heading into and the fact that over the next thirty-one years I would have an unpredictable and adventurous career path--I am coming to recognize the powerful integrating factor of purpose. When we feel like our life has purpose there is an energy coursing through our veins that can at times, feel extra human.

2. We are in a yearlong teaching series called "Why We Gather." This series explores the high level reasons why people gather together outside of family and work for meaningful experiences and asks what it means to do the same as a community of Christ followers. We are grateful to Lisa and Heather Albinson, the First Covenant Visual Artists in residence, who used the art form of "tan

grams” to give us visual support for each segment of our series. The first segment of the series was...



“Growing a Community Devoted to God, Neighbor, and One Another.” The second segment was...

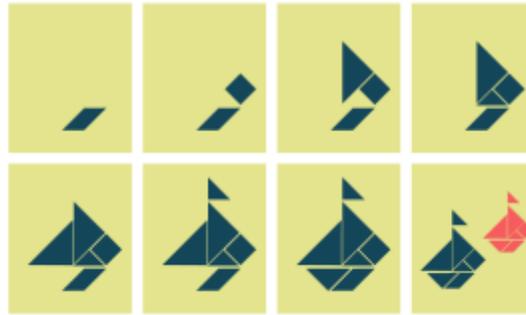


“Choosing Personal Transformation of body, mind and spirit.” The third segment that concluded last week was, “Caring for Others Through Social Transformation”



And, today we begin the fourth segment, “Finding Purpose”...

4. "Finding Purpose"



...clarifying, articulating, and acting on one's personal mission in life. We will pause for Holy Week that begins next Sunday, but then after that cover purpose finding topics such as "Discernment," "The Prayer of Examine," "Vocation as a Life Theme," "Shared Purpose," "Guiding Children," "Being Single," and "Holy Listening" (the role of Spiritual Direction in Purpose finding).

3. Today's topic, "Scripture and the Power of Personal narrative" seeks to ground purpose finding in the spaces where our personal lived narratives converge with our Protestant Christian faith that holds Scripture as eminently important. I want to be clear about something at the outset of the sermon. The Bible is a complex and rich library of books woven together through the symmetry of Jewish and Christian traditions that is to be interpreted carefully and lived with humility. And, the Bible serves us more as the Creator's *mirror* to the human experience than God's blueprint.

It is a mirror more than a blueprint because the Bible represents personal human accounts and theologies over six millennia, some clear and historical and others cryptic and mystical, of human beings encountering and with frailty trying to make sense of an immense Creator God who is both far and near, understandable and incomprehensible, and in every case imbued and exuding truth and grace. And, the Bible is a holy and authoritative mirror because, to the discerning person, it affords us expansive personal vision alongside life giving boundaries for all who seek to lead purpose filled lives.

4. The primary Scripture I have chosen for today is intriguing because it is a small portion of a second letter written by the Apostle Paul to the first century church in the Roman city of Corinth. Apparently, this particular church questioned Paul's credibility from time to time because here and in his first letter (I know it's hard to believe that a church would ever question a pastor) Paul points out that their very existence as a church is the proof of both his life purpose and his credibility as a pastor."¹

2 Corinthians 3:1-6

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? ² You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. ³ You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

⁴ Such confidence we have through Christ before God. ⁵ Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. ⁶ He has

¹ 1 Corinthians 9:2.

made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

2 Corinthians 3:1-6. NIV

5. This richly layered text represents a unique combination of Paul's personal vocational resume of ministry credibility, and a theology of personal purpose for all Christ followers. Said a little differently, Paul articulates in these verses that, "our sense of life purpose should flow directly into how we live our day to day lives read by everyone and proof of credibility is how our lives build up other people's lives. And, for Christ followers, this means embodying our beliefs such that we are living letters from Christ to our world—living letters written not with legalistic religious framework ink, but with the creative Spirit of the Living God kind of ink that flows from the life giving Covenant of grace.

I am going to expand a little on this to point out that purpose finding is a communal, Spirit infused, and creative process that is ultimately an invitation to experience life as participation.

A. Purpose Finding in Community

1. There is much confusion in American culture as to whether or not we need one another. It's because of rugged individualism. "Rugged Individualism" is a term that was highly politicized in the twentieth century and casts a long shadow in the twenty first century.² It was initially the idea that government help for people should be minimal, but there is growing mountain of evidence that tells us rugged individualism has morphed such that there are millions of Americans who really do not care how they are connected to one another and across differences. And, it needs to be said that when a people come to believe that no basic net is needed for its most vulnerable populations, they have lost their way and an essential part of their humanity.
2. For the Apostle Paul and the Early Christians, and Jesus and the first disciples before them, such thinking was far from their way of life. For them, to be Christian is to be connected, and to see ourselves as connected to all of life, including our neighbor. So, it is no wonder that some of the most potent sense of purposes we can pursue in life is to give and help others as we form common life together in Christian community and out in broader society as well.

Life in broader society is complicated. And, so it's important to get clarification and be mentored in how we apply our sense to purpose to our everyday life including our choice of careers. This is where community is essential. The best families and friend networks provide a web of relationships that inform and guide us in our passions and pursuits. The best institutions give us the kind of community frameworks that help us refine our sense of purpose. Colleges and Universities are at their best when they help us ask the right questions and follow the most helpful path where our life energy can be spent on that which we either get paid to do, or find some way to fund our lives so we can do that purposeful thing whether we are paid or not.

3. Church communities are at their best when we do more than teach Christian doctrine. Christian teaching is essential, but righteousness as Jesus taught is more about right relationships with God and others than right answers. And, so spending time together gives us the moments and spaces to take what we feel is core to our various senses of purpose and help us interpret it into our day

² <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/rugged-individualism> (accessed 4-1-17)

to day lives. This can take place through many creative means, even like yesterday where about 50 of us showed up at Memory Lanes...



And, no I did not win a trophy! Rats. It wasn't a bad day for me, but no one could beat Rachel Darling...



...A mild mannered pediatrician by day and apparently a professional bowler on the weekends because she bowled a 161 game and took the First Covenant "Pin Punisher" travelling trophy!



I did get the consolation "Beloved Bowler" blue ribbon handed out to everyone, but I am not sure that I behaved like the beloved as it was all going down...



...but I will be back next year whether or not my wife Holly laughs at me, or Marita Albinson tries to console me! And, I am sure others will as well because there were more conversations being tossed about than bowling balls and relationships being built than high scores. (can I get an amen from the consolation prize winners?!)



If you wore your ribbon today, you have to stand up. I came home and threw mine in the garbage, and Holly made me pull it out! (holding it up)

4. There are many other gathering spaces in our community, of course. Such as Thursday a group gathered at the Open Book Café called the “Just Mercy Book Club”...



..where they discussed the book *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, a book that struggles with the lived and embodied experience of African Americans today. And, there are other Life Groups, Bible studies, service groups, classes and gatherings outside this worship environment that are for the purpose of helping us know Christ and refine our unique and individual senses of purpose.

Personal networks, learning institutions, churches, all of these are essential communities for us to understand the deep idea that is as work within us, that drives us, that we call purpose.

B. Purpose Finding as a Creative Work of the Spirit of God

1. It is a Christian theological notion that our deep drive to have purpose and the specifics of that purpose come from our creator. The Apostle Paul wrote another letter to the Early Church in the city of Ephesus that included theological reflections and words of encouragement. In chapter two he wrote something very provocative:

¹⁰For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:10. NIV

In this brief statement Paul said that we have been created by God to be creators like God. And, because of Jesus we are re-created to do good. But, most provocatively Paul said that our Creator created us to be creators who do good works that are *pre-designed* for us such that when we do them, we are not only "doing" what we were uniquely created to do, we are being who we were created to be. There is glorious mystery in this because it puts into motion a highly creative dynamic between us and God.

2. Much of the modern career world has been designed to urge people along very specific concrete pathways as if everyone needs to walk measured out pre-designed "career ladder climbing" if one is to reach their goals. The analogue to this strict sense of path in Christian theology is the overheated notion of predestination and in science what some call "hard determinism."³ However, the Apostle Paul did not go that deep into the paradigms of time and space. He left things open to mystery and for an on-going dialogue with our Creator about purpose as a wide-open-life-long pursuit of meaning. Even more, later in his second letter to the Corinthian Church Paul taught that it would be our struggles and weaknesses that would be our greatest teachers and guides on the pathway of purpose finding.⁴
3. What excites me about the times we live in now is that the further the modern world moves into the experience and creative economy on a global scale, it is obvious to many that work and careers are as dynamic, changing and as unpredictable as the marketplace itself. This is, I believe, more in sync with how we get at our sense of purpose and calling from God, which is a bit like this image:



³ <https://www.tutor2u.net/religious-studies/blog/free-will-and-determinism> (accessed 4-1-17)

⁴ 2 Corinthians 12:10.

This is called a “desire line” illustration. It contrasts a pre-determined paved path telling everyone where they are supposed to walk with a desire design created path made over time by people actually walking the more intuitive path through the park.

4. For the Christ follower, it is our belief that God dwells in our souls and awakening to Christ’s presence in us is the beautiful conversion that begins many conversations with God about our purpose. It is our joy, then, (getting back to the Apostle Paul’s living letter metaphor) to creatively design our lives by paying attention to the voice of God within us refined by resonance and dissonance from those we trust with our journey, and to let the fruit of the Spirit flow through us through literally *thousands* of possible desire line pathways. And, the basic fruit of the Spirit Paul described to another early church in the Roman city of Galatia as love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.⁵
5. That kind of wide open imagination can be intimidating for some though. And, this is where Scripture and the power of personal story converge. It is only human to want some examples to follow. Reading and meditating on Scripture is a long held tradition in the Christian and Jewish faith.
 - If you are someone who is sensing that it is your purpose to leave what you know and go to new spaces and lands, reading Abraham and Sara’s narrative in the book of Genesis can give you inspiration. Their fears and failures, faith and courage, all expressed as sojourners moving through unfamiliar places help us to have a starting imagination for the things we may encounter and how God is in it all.
 - If you are someone who at one point, moved in the halls of power, and because of your stance for social justice find yourself on the outside looking in, it is essential reading to study Moses’ relationships to power.
 - If you are someone with an unusual amount of talent for this or that thing, but find yourself deeply marginalized by everything from family systems to structural societal systems, it is Joseph that needs to become your distant mentor. He will instruct you in the uncertainties of talent and personal integrity in a world that doesn’t much care for either unless it gives them personal advantage.
 - A beautiful contribution to the voice and power of the feminine voice is with a women named Debra, a righteous judge in the Hebrew book of Judges in a violent time of biblical history. She is an example of someone who navigated the dicey work of seeking peace in a time of war.

I could go on, and include women and men who travelled with Jesus in his itinerate ministry who are people from another time who wrestled with many of the same matters that we do today. And, in every case, the study of their lives gives us reflections and lived frameworks that help us creatively get at our own purpose finding today.

6. Before I conclude today, there is a difficult to embrace open secret about Scripture and personal narrative that needs to be mentioned. When you open Scriptures and read about women and men you realize that most often times they are “failing forward.” And, that will be true for us as well. The

⁵ Galatians 5:22-23.

reality is that our deepest growth in finding and living our purpose is not when everything is going perfectly. They grew, and we grow with things fall apart. It was Richard Rohr who said:

“If we seek spiritual heroism ourselves, the old ego is just back in control under a new name...Failure and humiliation force you to look where you never would otherwise...God comes to you disguised as your life...so we must stumble and fall or we will never learn how to give up control to the Real Guide.”⁶

This is all kind of hard to take in, but necessary. And, life giving to those who are willing to fail forward as well.

7. I can attest to this through a recent set of experiences that helped me refine my sense of purpose as a pastor and Christ follower. A few weeks back I was a keynote speaker at the 9th Annual Dinner of Abrahamic Traditions in St Paul. I spoke to the ways that Christianity does and doesn't teach us how to be peacemakers. As a follow-up to my presentation, Pastor Sara Wilhelm Garbers, who as at the even both as a First Covenant Pastor and a United Seminary Professor, and I had the honor of meeting with two Rabbis who attended the event with one being the feature presenter for Judaism. The conversation was both a generous and meaningful conversation about the ways Christians understand the ancient Israelite texts of the Bible and how we approach the gospel accounts of Jesus and Jewish people in relationship to Jesus.

Their challenge to Sara and myself was that Christians improve they ways they understand that first, the texts of the Bible are an ancient Israelite history and not the religion of Judaism today. And, second, as we enter Holy Week, that the figures surrounding Jesus do not represent Judaism either. The Rabbis brought this up because some of the comments in my presentation at the dinner, while being in many ways self-reflective and self-critiquing, did not include these important distinctions.

My lesson, that helped me in my purpose to be a good Christian pastor, is to always consider the complex relationship of Jesus to Judaism as much broader and more generous than is often interpreted in popular movies and Holy Week sermons. And, remember that all of us need to be careful in our reading of these ancient Israelite figures, and how we might inappropriately mischaracterize the Jewish faith when in fact the deeper wrestling's with Jesus in the passion week is with human systems of religion that appear in all religious traditions, including Christian religion.

Conclusion

1. As I conclude it is important to note that purpose finding looks a little different in each stage of life. When I was tagged in the 1986 graduation photo I was gripped by how many seasons I have gone through while moving along with Generation X. I admire and love the builder generation for their pragmatism and courage. I feel more squeezed and sometimes ripped apart in-between the Baby Boomer and the Millennial generations. Every generation sees reality and purpose a little different, and this is important.

⁶ Richard Rohr. Falling Upward. Pages 65-66.

I am reading a lovely book that helps me with this, and it is called “Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life” that speaks to all generations. The authors point out to Millennials that it is not your degree that determines your career. Today, 75% of all college graduates don’t end up working in a career related to their field. And to GenXers and Boomers, being successful does not mean we will be happy. True happiness comes from designing a life that works for us. And, to the builder generation they say “its never too late to design a life you love.”⁷

2. And, adding the Christian theological lens, designing a life filled with purpose is the process of listening to the voice of God from within framed by the teachings of Jesus, meditating on the overtures of broader Scripture that mirror back to us some who have gone before us, and processing purpose in community with others. Young, middle aged, or in the later stages of life, purpose finding in every season of life is like picking up pen and paper and writing our life’s story as a living letter that the world will read.

Prayer

God in and outside of time, fill our days with purpose. Jesus Christ, our Savior and model, help us to understand how your teachings filter into purpose finding. Holy Spirit, may your creative power push and pull us into conversations and spaces where our purpose can take flight. God, three in One, we pray that you infuse our days with purpose. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Benediction

As the new week begins, may we see purpose finding as a communal, Spirit infused, and creative process that is ultimately an invitation to experience life as participation.

Go in peace. Amen.

⁷ Burnett, Bill; Evans, Dave. Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life . Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.