

Sermon Discussion Information

Sermon Series: "Finding Purpose: Clarifying, Articulating, and Acting on One's Personal Mission in Life"

Sermon Title: "Shared Purpose"

Sermon Text: Ecclesiastes 3-4

Listener's Journey: I want my listener to value and invest in healthy relational partnerships as an essential means to journey with others through the complexities of our world and to find purpose together with others in our daily lives.

Unique Quotes from Sermon:

This is both perplexing and beautiful at the same time! And, so true to partnerships, right? There is something almost absurd about the way partnerships work, and yet there is a mystical dynamic in it all. In reference to the metaphor of "a cord of three strands" the biblical author is asserting that two people, together, and by choosing to be together, invite a third strand of presence to exist. And, the Christian tradition has long interpreted this to be the presence of God in a marriage. It is that, and wider than that as well, based upon the many and varied partnerships that we see in the sweep of biblical literature, and the nature of relationships that is self-evident overall.

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The Bible is filled with examples of partnerships in which two were better than one. Some of the partnerships were conventional and some were quite out of the ordinary:

- Sara and Abraham were a remarkable and flawed nomadic couple who experimented with everything from lying about her being his sister when afraid of a threatening king to having Abraham have sex with Sara's personal attendant to have a child that Sara was not able to bear. Later, they had a biological child and learned to have a deeper faith in one another and God.
- Moses had working partners ranging from Aaron in the building of a new liturgical way to worship God to Joshua in organizing a massive and mobile people group.
- The prophet Elijah was homeless at one point in his life and was welcomed in by a widow and her son. The widow was from of different religious tradition, but living together the three of them survived a serious famine in their land. Jesus pointed out the beautiful faith and courage of the widow of Zarephath in his inaugural sermon recounted by Luke in chapter 4 of his gospel biography.

There are many more, and some of the partnerships are just as unconventional:

- David was a very close friend and companion to Jonathan, the son of King Saul. The same Saul who was trying to kill David.
- Esther partnered with her uncle Mordecai against systemic societal oppression.
- Ruth chose to convert to Judaism and partner with her widowed mother-in-law Naomi. One of the most beautiful phrases in all of Scripture on partnering is what Ruth said to Naomi when Naomi released her two daughters to return to their family of origin which would have had a much higher degree of financial security. Ruth refused to leave Naomi saying: "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." Ruth 1:16-17. NIV
- In the New Testament Jesus had Peter, James and John as a close knit travelling partnership. Paul partnered with Barnabus for a time. Then Silas. Then, with Timothy. And, I could go on because all throughout Scripture we see people partnering, sometime married to each other,

other times working together, and in every case—helping one another up when the other falls down.

Double coverage, helping up, and a third reason to partner is as the writer of Ecclesiastes wrote: “if two lie down together, they will keep warm.” This has often been interpreted to be speaking about sexual intimacy. Yet, there is no reason to believe that the author either meant or didn’t mean sexual intimacy. In nomadic times as in many places around the world today where housing is nothing more than a simple thatched or tin roof overhead--staying warm is something that couples and families do to stay alive. It is also important to think for a few minutes about sexual intimacy as well. Discussing sex in the many marriage counseling sessions I have with couples over the years...(I bet you would like to know how we talk about sex in counseling sessions, wouldn’t you!) the main point that I share with couples is this—sex is a holistic idea. Good sex demands commitment and investment in taking the time to know one another completely. Healthy sex is about safety, sacredness, and pleasure. Even more, the great secret of healthy intimacy is the practice of serving one another... holistically serving one another. The good lover is always asking “what does my spouse want? What can I do to create pleasure for them?”

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Three Discussion Questions:

1. How would you describe your understanding of the range of meaningful partnerships including marriage? (Personal sharing)
2. The text describes several aspects of healthy relational dynamics. What stands out as important to you and why? (Exploring the text)
3. What are a few things from this conversation that would be helpful for your shared purpose finding with another person? (Direct application)