

“Finding Purpose”

A Sermon for University Congregational Church

Sunday, December 29, 2019

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Traditional Word

9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, [a] in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 1 Peter 2:9

Contemporary Word

“The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.”

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

“In the beginning, God created the earth, and he looked upon it in His cosmic loneliness.

And God said, "Let Us make living creatures out of mud, so the mud can see what We have done." And God created every living creature that now moveth, and one was man. Mud as man alone could speak. God leaned close to mud as man sat up, looked around, and spoke. Man blinked. "What is the purpose of all this?" he asked politely.

"Everything must have a purpose?" asked God.

"Certainly," said man.

"Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this," said God.

And He went away.”

— Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*

“Doubt as sin. — Christianity has done its utmost to close the circle and declared even doubt to be sin. One is supposed to be cast into belief without reason, by a miracle, and from then on to swim in it as in the brightest and least ambiguous of elements: even a glance towards land, even the thought that one perhaps exists for something else as well as swimming, even the slightest impulse of our amphibious nature — is sin! And notice that all this means that the foundation of belief and all

reflection on its origin is likewise excluded as sinful. What is wanted are blindness and intoxication and an eternal song over the waves in which reason has drowned.”

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*

“What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.”

— Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage*

“If you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I am living for, in detail, ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for.”

— Thomas Merton

“Be a lamp, or a lifeboat, or a ladder. Help someone's soul heal. Walk out of your house like a shepherd.”

— Rumi

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Recently, I asked my home computer device, Alexa, one of the most important questions there is. Now, for those of you who don't know what Alexa is, it's this cylinder that sits in our living room and you can give it commands and it can do various things. You can say, Alexa: Play some classical music. Or, Alexa, what's the next thing on my schedule? Or, Alexa, what's the weather going to be like today. And if everything aligns correctly, which it usually does, she'll comply. She'll start sending a lovely Mozart piece or tell me which meeting I need to be prepping for and if I should wear a jacket today. One of our favorite things lately has been to ask

Alexa to tell us a joke or two...and boy, does she tell the worst jokes. Worse than mine! I know you find that hard to believe, but she tells some stinkers.

When you ask Alexa what is the meaning of life she replies with this: "Depends on the life in question. 42 is a good approximation." Now, if you've never read Douglas Adams's "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" that answer doesn't make much sense—42? What? But if you know the story of Arthur Dent as he hitchhikes his way through the galaxy, you know that 42 is shorthand for the ineffable humor and possible futility found in trying to answer that question. Even the author, Douglas Adams, admitting to this: "The answer to this is very simple," Adams said. "It was a joke. It had to be a number, an ordinary, smallish number, and I chose that one. Binary representations, base 13, Tibetan monks are all complete nonsense. I sat on my desk, stared in to the garden and thought 42 will do. I typed it out. End of story." And that's why 42 is often given as the answer to the question of the meaning of life. But I am more intrigued by the first part of Alexa's answer: "Depends on the life in question". And that is where I want us to focus this morning.

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A biblical approach to purpose.

In the ancient world finding your purpose in life—finding meaning—was often relegating to just getting through the day. Indeed, even today many people don't have the privilege of being able to contemplate what their purpose is—don't get me wrong please—I'm not meaning to sound elitist here: That only those of us, those in a certain class or education level or whatever—only "we" have the wherewithal to

contemplate the meaning of our lives. I mean that often times the pondering of the question gets relegated to the back seat of our lives as we simply try to get through the day. Or perhaps I have it backwards—maybe those folks who never contemplate the question have found all of the meaningfulness their lives need. Maybe I'm the poorer one here for even trying to answer the question.

But, it intrigues me to think about that ancient dictum of Socrates that the unexamined life is not worth living. Even in his day just getting through the day was a challenge. Imagine what the earliest followers of Christ went through to make their lives work. I'm convinced that their lives were as complex and captivating as any of ours. What set them apart was that these early renegades from the established order had found a new way to live. Instead of living in the thrall of the Roman Emperor, of Caesar, they chose to be in thrall to the God of Abraham as revealed through the life and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. They interpreted that event as a turning point for mankind and they then, in turn, used the man's teachings as a model on which they might find meaning in their own lives.

In one of the pastoral letters in the bible, one attributed to Peter but probably written by someone else with his name attached, we find these words regarding the fledgling Christ followers and how they were being taught to make meaning in their own lives—from 1 Peter chapter 2, verse 9: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,[a] in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." The writer is using the tradition of teaching that grew up around Peter's memory as a

reminder that by being in a Christian community, they were enjoying special privileges—part of a “chosen race”—and that they might find purpose in “proclaiming mighty acts” of the one who called them to live life in this new and different manner. By these words, the teachers of the way of Peter, as it might be said, were instructing their followers to “make” meaning, rather than “find” meaning. That is: by proclaiming the mighty acts the followers might instead make their lives meaningful because they are then proceeding in the faith in a way that would be pleasing to the teacher. In this case, followers of the Petrine documents, many of which are still the foundation of the Orthodox and Catholic churches.

One of my favorite authors is Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. He had a terrific way of making us all look foolish and brilliant in the same sentence. His work is peppered with terrific theology and I found this section of his novel “Cat’s Cradle” to hold a way of “making meaning” in a life as opposed to “finding meaning” in a life: These are Vonnegut’s words: “In the beginning, God created the earth, and he looked upon it in His cosmic loneliness. And God said, "Let Us make living creatures out of mud, so the mud can see what We have done." And God created every living creature that now moveth, and one was man. Mud as man alone could speak. God leaned close to mud as man sat up, looked around, and spoke. Man blinked. "What is the purpose of all this?" he asked politely. "Everything must have a purpose?" asked God. "Certainly," said man. "Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this," said God. And He went away.” How’s that for enigmatic!

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I often think it would be much easier to stop asking so many questions. I often think I would be much happier just turning off my brain and accepting all of the dogma and doctrine of the Orthodox and Catholic churches—not that there is not great thinking happening there—but more that it is difficult to ask the questions I ask as a progressive Christian because all of my questions presuppose the existence of doubt.

I tend to share Fredrick Nietzsche's thinking in regards to doubt and the Christian faith—he wrote these words: "Doubt as sin. — Christianity has done its utmost to close the circle and declared even doubt to be sin. One is supposed to be cast into belief without reason, by a miracle, and from then on to swim in it as in the brightest and least ambiguous of elements: even a glance towards land, even the thought that one perhaps exists for something else as well as swimming, even the slightest impulse of our amphibious nature — is sin! And notice that all this means that the foundation of belief and all reflection on its origin is likewise excluded as sinful. What is wanted are blindness and intoxication and an eternal song over the waves in which reason has drowned."

I have instead made it my life's work to better understand the shoreline that Nietzsche was contemplating—to better understand how dogma and doctrine come to be in the first place—and to better understand how they are used to control and dominate people and institutions.

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CONCLUSION

In the end, I am convinced that I am asking Alexa the wrong question: What is the meaning of life? Instead of looking for some grand answer to the meaning of life, we should instead ask ourselves: What gives my life meaning? What gives my life purpose? And I believe the answer is all about you—because the things that give your life meaning are the things in your life. The things that you are doing. That is your life. If you fill your life with drama and chaos, then you find meaning in those things—much to the dismay of those of us who moved on from that after adolescence. And if you fill your life with beauty and music and people—then those are the things that give your life meaning. And if you're lucky enough to belong to a community such as University Congregational Church, then you know that this place and these people help you make meaning in your life.

The Trappist monk and mystic, Thomas Merton captured this when he wrote “If you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I am living for, in detail, ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for.”

A brand new year is upon us. 2020 is looming on our collective horizons and there's nothing to be done to stop the beautiful march of days. How we spend those days—what we fill them with—that becomes our purpose. So, if you fill your march of days with news programs telling us how horrible the state of the world is, or if you fill your days chasing after the latest fad or fashion, or if you spend your march of days

pursuing money in all of its many different forms, then that is what gives your life meaning. That's your 42.

But if instead you spend your days engaged in being a good neighbor—in improving the lives of those people in your sphere of influence—if you are building honest and loving relationships with those about you—if you are actively trying to improve yourself through education or training or even looking for a new job (or any job for some of us)—if you fill your days with those things—then that is what gives your life meaning. That is your purpose. That's your 42.

Kurt Vonnegut was once told us what we should be telling young people about finding their purpose: “What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.” I believe this congregation has been engaged with the building of such a community. I also believe we have much work to do in regards to curing that horrible disease. Perhaps 2020 will be the year that you help us cure that disease. You can help, you know? Reach out to someone you think might be lonely.

One last thought to take us out of 2019 and into the new decade: Rumi, the 13th century Persian poet and theologian reminds us to “Be a lamp, or a lifeboat, or a ladder. Help someone's soul heal. Walk out of your house like a shepherd.” For me, finding my purpose has been living in service to this community—to this congregation—this church. You give me opportunities daily to be a lamp unto the world—to sometimes be your lifeboat—sometimes be your ladder. And while I have

some difficulty still with the societal baggage associated with certain aspects of being a pastor—when you let me be your shepherd, I am honored and obligated to do so. I'm getting better at that aspect of my work with you—perhaps in 2020 you will give me more opportunities to improve this skill?

So the next time I ask my Alexa what the meaning of life is and she responds with: “Depends on the life in question, 42 is a good approximation” I will respond with another question: Alexa, what can I do today that will give my life meaning-what can I do today that will give my life purpose? I can't wait to hear her answer!

RESOURCES USED

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*