

## THE GOAL OF LIFE

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, April 22, 2018  
based on Mark 12:28-34; Ephesians 3:7-21***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a spring sermon series entitled, “Fulfill Your Destiny.” In the opening sermon in this series, we considered the basic Biblical message that we have a God-given destiny in life, which does not mean that our life journey is foreordained, but rather that there is a purpose or goal toward which God is leading us. We consider further this morning what the goal is. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . .

A fellow named Bernard once made this observation about human life: “You see it happening every day: landowners ‘lay field to field’ and seek by all means to extend their property, however much they may possess already; and those who live in spacious habitations are daily joining house to house and ever in a fever building new or taking down or altering the old . . . And people in high positions, too, are they not always on the climb, trying to hoist themselves to higher places still? There is no limit to such restlessness, because in all these things the absolute can never be attained. What utter madness—to spend all this energy trying to get things which, when acquired, can never satisfy or even take the edge off our desires? There is no peace in the possession of things such as these; whatever you have got you still want more; always you are worrying for what you lack. And so it happens that the restless heart, worn out with fruitless toil, is never satisfied however much it gluts; and the ceaseless torment of desire for what it has not got kills all its pleasure in the things it has. For, after all, who can have everything?”

That was written by Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century. Human beings have not changed much since then. People still so often get caught up in a perpetual quest for more.

What is the point of life? Many people today answer that question by saying that the point of life is to be happy. Then they try to gain happiness by attaining things and experiences and recognitions, but none of it ever really satisfies. Others say that there is simply no point to life. But within that emptiness they then try to make something out of life by building up their position in the world, but everything simply passes in the end. It all leads to the kind of furious and endless grasping that Bernard of Clairvaux portrayed.

A scribe once came to Jesus and asked, “Which commandment is first of all?” [*One of the scribes came and asked Jesus, “Which commandment is first of all?” Mark 12:28*] We tend to think of commandments as obligations, so we are likely to misread this question. To a first century scribe, who was a Jewish leader well trained in the Scriptures, the commandments were conceived as guideposts for life. The Old Testament often spoke of the commandments as being like pathways that would lead you in the right direction in living. So to ask, “Which commandment is first of all?” was a way of saying, “What is the number one goal of life?”

Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.” And right upon that he said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:30-31)

The goal of life, says Jesus, lies beyond ourselves. This is why Jesus elsewhere calls us to deny ourselves, a teaching which goes directly against our contemporary culture, which repeatedly suggests that the purpose of life is to indulge ourselves. But Jesus says that we have a destiny that is

much more than this, that we are to become part of something much larger than ourselves—part of the endless love of God.

This is what Paul was talking about in that passage we heard from Ephesians, where he said, “God has carried out His eternal purpose in Christ Jesus our Lord . . . I pray that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God’s Spirit, that Christ may dwell in your heart through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love, that you may know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:11-19)

What Paul sketches out here is a movement of being connected with a grand purpose—joining with the power of God’s Spirit to live out the love of Christ. Then he concludes with an extraordinary statement, as he says, “Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory.” (Ephesians 3:20-21) Paul says that as we join with God, God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can imagine. You know, I can imagine a lot. So if God is able to do far more, that means my imagination is too small, or maybe I am imagining the wrong things, or maybe I just need to be receptive to the fact that God will work in ways beyond what I can even conceive.

This past week Pope Francis was taking part in a public question and answer session at a church in Rome where young people were asking the questions. A little boy came to the microphone, but he was too shy to speak. He was brought up to the pope. He began to cry. He whispered into the pope’s ear, and the pope spent some time just holding and consoling him. Then the pope spoke to the crowd. He explained that the boy’s father had recently died. The boy said that his father was a good man who had had his four children baptized. But his father was an atheist. The boy’s exact question, in Italian: “E in cielo papa?” Is Dad in heaven?

“What do you think?” Pope Francis asked the crowd. ‘If this man was able to create a child like this,” said the Pope, “it is true that he was a good man . . . But he did not have the gift of faith, was not a believer. So what do you think? What is God’s heart toward a dad like that? Do you think God would leave this man far away from himself?” The children in the crowd began to answer, “No.” “There, you have your answer,” Pope Francis said to the boy. “God has a dad’s heart.”

God is able to accomplish far more than we can imagine. We can never figure God out or know the mysteries of heaven or call the shots for God—as Pope Francis also noted in his remarks, it is God who decides who goes to heaven—but we can know God’s heart, when we look to Jesus. In Jesus we see God’s attitude toward us, that God looks on us with mercy, and we see God’s intended destiny for us—to live in the love of God, now and forever. It is in God—or as Paul said, “being filled with the fullness of God”—that we find satisfaction for the soul.

But what if we are terribly flawed? What if our love for God falls short? What if our love for others is very imperfect? What if we are lacking in faith? The extremely important message in Ephesians is that it is not up to us to finally muster up enough love and enough faith that we get ourselves to our right destiny. Notice where the accent falls in Ephesians, where Paul prays “that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God’s Spirit . . . that Christ may dwell in your heart through faith . . . that you may be filled with all the fullness of God . . . who by His power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” (Ephesians 3:16-20) The promise of the gospel is that the Lord comes to us in grace and will dwell within us and will act with spiritual power to raise us up into life with God. So although we may fall

short in faith and in love, it is Christ at work within us who is able to accomplish abundantly, in and through us, far more than we can ever manage.

Thus when we talk about the goal of life, it is not something finally that we must reach by our own effort. We find our purpose on this earth as God's people, and we arrive at our final destination of heaven as we open ourselves to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We fulfill our destiny as we are connected to the great working of the Spirit of God.

So the challenge for us is not so much in being able to reach the goal, for it is Christ to provides the way—reconciling us with God, enabling us now and forever to live in the love of God. The challenge very often is that too easily we can lose sight of the goal altogether. This is what Bernard of Clairvaux was talking about—how people get distracted by all sorts of false goals in life that actually lead nowhere. In the hubbub and turmoil of today's world, it is especially easy to get distracted from where God would lead us, because there are so many voices in our culture calling us in ways contrary to God—into materialism, into moral laxity, into hatred and despising of others, into a lifestyle that leaves God out. We need spiritual focus to stay on track. There is a powerful scene along this line in the movie, *Race*—which told the story of the Olympic journey of Jesse Owens—about keeping focus in a world that is full of prejudice and wrong and antagonism:

*A scene from the movie was played, in which Jesse is subjected to racist taunts as he trains. Back in the locker room, his coach begins talking to him about the problem of getting distracted. The football team—which had been the source of the taunts—then walks in, and insists, using racial slurs, that Jesse and his teammates need to clear immediately out of the locker room. But Jesse's coach continues to talk, his voice rising above the shouts of the football coach and team, telling Jesse and his teammates that this is all noise, that they need to learn to block it out, because when they are out competing they will be on their own. For Jesse, the shouting of the others seems to fade, and he clearly hears his coach saying, "Jesse, do you hear me?" "Yes, coach," he says, "I hear you."*

We need to block out the noise of the world around us to keep our focus on what is truly important and right. The one thing we might add to that scene is that as Christians in the midst of the noise of the world we are not on our own, but we have Christ with us to empower us.

During the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, he had a trusted advisor named Harry Hopkins. Harry Hopkins became quite ill during the latter part of FDR's presidency and in fact was near death; he was so ill that he was only able to work a few hours a day. Many people wondered openly why FDR was keeping the man on. But FDR claimed that Harry Hopkins was his most valuable advisor, and a chief reason for this was that Harry was particularly enabled by his condition to do what many of us struggle to do— he was able to focus on what is truly important. Indeed he had such a gift for discerning what is critical and casting aside the rest that Winston Churchill called him "Lord Heart of the Matter."

This is what Jesus moves us to do—to direct ourselves to the heart of the matter. Love God, he says, and love one another. As we join ourselves with Jesus Christ, He leads us to fulfill our true destiny, sharing in the eternal love of God. So we connect with the spirit of Paul, who elsewhere in his letter to the Philippians said, "This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:13-14)