

Homily Notes Sept 20.15 A Life Worth Living: a new purpose

Pray

Questions are our friends. I remember being asked questions while on Sentry Duty at Old Fort Henry in Kingston, great summer job, marching around in uniform, firing rifles and canons and taking tours. Greaves, Guardsman First Class, 1092. Black cap, tunic, pants, boots, rifle with bayonet, big red beard! A tourist walks up, looks at me and says, “May I ask a question?” You just did, I thought to myself, but soldiers guarding the fort aren’t allowed to roll their eyes in derision. Then came the person’s real question, “why is there a spider building a web on your cheek?” Legit.



One of the most profound questions we can ask is ‘why’? Why am I here? Why did this or that happen? Questions are not the mark of a lack of intelligence or unfaithfulness, but of a curious and lively mind. There’s no stupid question we say, but we still feel stupid somehow asking it! Questions cultivate the earth for deeper possibilities, deeper faith and a purposeful life. If you’re tempted to NOT ask the question because you are afraid of looking silly, think of Jesus’ question: Who do you say I am? Questions are an essential part of the journey of faith.

Paul, the author of Philippians, might have asked why, why is he in prison, under house-arrest, at his own expense in Rome, a city of four million souls and there he is chained to a imperial guard night and day, when it was the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem who brought charges against him, when he could be church planting, spreading the gospel? Let’s look a little closer at Paul’s circumstances...

Paul would seem to have every right to ask “why” given his Physical and Emotional challenges.

First, while it is true that Paul was granted some rather unusual liberties – he could receive visitors, who were permitted to transport his letters to encourage the fledgling churches especially in Philippi (see Acts 28:16, 30-

31) - nonetheless, he was still a prisoner. The circumstance in itself imposes considerable stress. In his correspondence, he refers to himself as “the prisoner of Christ” (Ephesians 3:1) or “the prisoner of the Lord” (4:1), who is an “ambassador in chains” (6:20). Chains were commonly viewed as an object of shame (cf. 2 Timothy 1:16). Note the multiple references to his imprisonment (Philippians 1:7, 13, 14, 17.) It is obvious that the apostle’s status as a prisoner was a constant reminder of the sacrifices that sometimes are a necessary component of the Christian life.

Second, there is another factor which doubtless was a source of considerable grief to Paul - this rugged soldier of Jesus, having completed 3 missionary journeys, traveling thousands of kilometers—as reflected in Philippians known for its joyful tone. It was a spiritual wound more devastating than any physical injury or incarceration.

It was the wound of disappointment. Unfortunately, some members of the Roman congregation apparently did not like the notoriety Paul had generated. They were characterized by “envy” (a feeling of displeasure caused by the success of Paul) and “selfish ambition”, Philippians 1:15. Fueled by these base attitudes, this renegade group were “preaching Christ.” The content of their message did not warrant censure; rather, it was their motives that elicited the apostle’s rebuke—they were insincere and pretentious.

But what was their goal? Incredibly, they “intend to increase my suffering in my imprisonment” for the already-burdened Paul. It is not difficult to imagine a scenario. They might have proclaimed that Jesus Christ is “King”—a point very sensitive to the Roman authorities (cf. Acts 17:7) where the Emperor was king. When interrogated by the officials, these antagonists might well have suggested, “You can take this matter up with Paul, the prisoner. He is the most prominent leader of our movement.” Can anything more wicked be imagined?

Surely the weary apostle spent some sleepless nights praying for the regeneration of these evil hearts. In spite of all this heartache, however, Paul asks the only question in this passage, v 18, “What does it matter?” As unpleasant as his circumstances sometimes were, Paul could affirm that

“what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel.”

Now, THAT's big minded of him, keeping the purpose of his life in full view. Even if it's not HIM do the proclaiming, and not for the right motives, all right! The word is still getting out, though I'm chained in here.

While we are not all called to be evangelists or traveling church-planters or theological writers like the Apostle Paul, we can share something of God's work in our lives. Betty and Roy Wagler's experience of their house burning this summer was devastating. Despite their loss - almost everything they owned except for the clothes on their back while walking the dog, and even the cat made it out – there is an even greater sense of God's abundant grace to sustain them. You should hear Betty herself. She told me that she tells someone everyday that God is good and has helped them cope through this time. That wasn't something she would do before!

Without even knowing it, life has new purpose as the Wagler's rebuild their lives- to share what God has done and how good God is.

Gospel purposes were clear for Suzanna Wesley. Suzanna, mother of John and Charles Wesley the two great hymn writers, had 19 children and as a result she and her husband were extremely poor. Her husband left home twice, once because he was in debtor's prison and the second time because he disagreed with his wife's political views! She educated all the children single-handedly, teaching them Greek (by the age of 10), and most importantly, the Christian faith. She rarely left home, as she was too busy running the household, farming the land, and schooling the children (and cultivating political view she knew would keep her husband away, so she wouldn't die having another of his kids!) However, everyday she put her apron over her head for one hour and prayed. The children knew not to disturb her during that time.

“Within the walls of her home,” her biographer wrote, “she carried out a ministry to her children that was to change first England and then the world.” Suzanna Wesley explained her motivation thus: “I hope the fire I start will not only burn all of London, but all of the United Kingdom as well. I hope it will burn all over the world.” It did! She made the most of the opportunities by getting on with the job where she was. (N Gumbel, “A Life

Worth Living” pg 28).

Paul got on with the job where he was. Are we getting on with the job where we are? What are the opportunities? Are we making the most of them? All of us can have an impact. Wherever we are, Gospel purposes can happen. Come Holy Spirit. Help us make the most of our freedoms and help spread the good news!

RA Dickey abused as a child by his baby sitter, and by a man. Found his identity and purpose through baseball. When he was cut for the third time from a big league team, he thought he'd end his life, his purpose was over. A voice in his head said, surrender. Surrender your life. That's what he did. He gave up being a fast ball pitcher and had to totally relearn a new pitching technique called the Knuckleball. The key component of the knuckleball is to release the ball with no movement. You have to push the ball, surrendering it at just the right moment. R.A. Dickey that has been true of his life; surrender to the truth of him being a victim of abuse, to his wife, to his team mates, to God. Purpose grew out of the pain. He'd born his cross of secrecy and purposelessness, of worthlessness, long enough.

If you're asking questions, wondering why, maybe today is a day to ask in in writing. Paul's purpose was to know Christ and make him known. 1.21 "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain." For that he needed help. He needed prayer, encouragement of Timothy and others who visited him in prison, who helped provide for him and he needed the Holy Spirit, vs 19 God works through all these, prayer, people to encourage, the Spirit. Jesus said he came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom. As followers of Jesus, it's clear our purpose is to serve.

What question would you have of God today? About the bible? About church? Why not take a moment and write your question. I would ask that you print your name, but that is optional. Please place your question on the Offering basket when it gets passed.

A life worth living is energized by new purposes for living God gives us, in his word, through his spirit, in our prayer life, in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with others, in word and action.

Next time we'll explore A life worth living Jesus gives us in a new attitude.
Please join us. Study groups will be beginning this week. Thanks be to God.