Sunday, October 18, 1992
LIVING A LIFE OF PURPOSE (No. 1 in a Series: Recovering our Spiritual Heritage)
Galatians 5:16-26

Today, I am beginning a sermon series with the overall theme — RECOVERING OUR SPIRITUAL HERITAGE. You will discover, however, that this is also really a sermon series about miracles that are possible for all of us, about finding a new joy in everyday living regardless of our circumstances, and about discovering the true purpose for our lives as spiritual beings having a human experience. It is based on the promise of Jesus to all of us: "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly."

Why am I doing this sermon series now? Because I believe that many people in this country are searching for their spiritual heritage, for a spiritual foundation. Two examples come to mind. In mid-September, Forbes magazine published its 75th anniversary issue, asking the question, "Why do Americans feel so bad when they've got it so good?" In an attempt to answer this question, the editors asked eleven of America's best writers and scholars to give their non-economic answers. This list of eleven did not include any economists because the editors said, "They have nothing to tell us about the real reasons for America's discontent."

As I read this series of articles, there was a common thread. It isn't the national debt, the unemployment rate, or the current recession that is bothering many people. It's not the economic mess we're in. It's a spiritual problem. Too many people have lost their spiritual moorings, and many others in this generation never had any.

One of the writers in the Forbes series said: "We have lost, somehow, a sense of mystery — about us, our purpose, our meaning, our role." She went on to note that too many people today have expected to find happiness in the things of this world, in having things, and in consuming things. Our search for meaning or for happiness in that way only causes unhappiness. She wrote: "If you do not believe in another higher world, if you believe only in the flat material world around, then you are not only going to be disappointed, but despairing."

The second example: around the same time that Forbes published its 75th anniversary issue, the Wall Street Journal had a front-page story featuring John Updike, the well-known American writer.

The Wall Street Journal reporter wrote that Updike's novels, especially the four about Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, the first of which was Rabbit, Run and the last Rabbit at Rest, illustrate the search for our spiritual center. Having read these stories myself, I agree. In the novels, Rabbit Angstrom can't get enough. He eats, drinks, swaps wives (or more accurately, lets his wife swap him), gets rich, and retires to Valhalla Village. And still, he remains incomplete and searching. "Somewhere behind all this," he insists to himself, "there's something that wants me to find it." Have you ever felt that way?

Mr. Updike's ultimate theme is about a spiritual hunger that is especially strong in today's world. I see it in the people I meet and talk with every day.

To help us recover our spiritual heritage, or maybe for some of you, it will be discovering your spiritual self for the first time. Let's begin with a little philosophy and theology about the purpose of creation. This will provide the context for everything else in this sermon series.

What is life in this creation all about? More and more, we are coming to understand that the plan of creation seems to be a slow and steady unfolding of consciousness. A rock is alive with molecules, atoms, protons, neutrons, and electrons, and who knows what else. A rock is composed of the same basic stuff as we are, but it has no perceptible awareness. It is immune to feeling kicked or pulverized. It appears to be unaware. A plant is aware of the conditions of the soil, the seasons, and the humidity, and it will bloom with the spring sunlight. It is aware, but in a limited way.

Animals, when compared with minerals and vegetables, have more developed levels of awareness. Many animals show awareness of the seasons in their ability to migrate, of danger in their ability to elude predators, and of deep caring and love in relationships with their mates and their young.

And then there are human beings. We have the ultimate awareness of choice. We can choose to function at a lower level of awareness and simply exist. Some people let their possessions rule them or their appetites, like Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom in Updike’s novels, who tries to satisfy his spiritual hunger with all kinds of false gods. There are also those who always allow others to decide how they are going to act. They never deliberately make any choices and are like a bouncing ball that someone else is bouncing. Then they blame their condition on others outside themselves.

Or we can soar to new and higher levels of awareness, allowing ourselves to transcend our environment and literally discover a world where we live in harmony with others and with the whole creation. Then our lives are filled with exuberance and joy.

Our Christian faith, with its Hebrew roots, teaches that deep within each one of us is a spiritual center, a spiritual energy that pervades every part of what we know as our physical bodies. The Bible reminds us that “In God, we live and move and have our being.” When we rediscover and pay attention to this spiritual center with its energy, we begin to enter an entirely new realm of human experience where all things are possible. It is here that we make synchronistic “unbelievable” connections with others and with God.

In this spiritual awareness, the mystery begins to disappear, and our purpose in life begins to unfold. Our relationships miraculously shift to new levels of spiritual partnerships. If you are in business, then your business endeavors begin to “flow,” and you start to make decisions with less and less effort. You find an inner peace and happiness that pervades your life. This is what our Christian faith calls the fruit of the Spirit: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

We are born into this world with this spiritual center, with the Spirit of God as part of us, and when we die, it does not die. In fact, it is the loving Spirit of God that causes us to be born as human beings in the first place. To put it another way, there is an invisible but knowable life force within you and within every human being. This life force, this energy, is the Spirit and Love of God.

But there are so many things in this life that get us sidetracked, that lead us to ignore or forget our spiritual center. Even a little bit of religion can get in the way.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, longtime minister of Riverside Church in New York City, opened a famous sermon with the observation that the “largest number of people have just enough religion to make themselves miserable.”

He's right. If you have only a little bit of Christianity, you tend to understand having God at the center of your life as a duty rather than a joy. You wouldn't think of missing worship services on Christmas or Easter, but much more church-going than that, except in times of illness, anxiety, or national emergency, is not in the cards. You've done your duty. The annual pledge campaign is likewise a burden. Just like tax time, it comes around annually; and you have to figure it out all over again, what's the price of reasonable respectability.

But the biggest problem of having only a little bit of Christianity is that you never arrive at the point where you're really safe and secure in the grace of God. You never arrive at the joy of the faith, and you never experience the miracles that can be yours.

How then do we begin to recover or discover our spiritual heritage?

First, we need to ask and find the answer as to why God created us. What is our purpose? "Nothing is more likely to help a person overcome or endure troubles than the consciousness of having a task in life." Viktor Frankl wrote those words as he endured the brutality and insanity of a Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz during the Second World War.

God created us for a purpose. Everything in the universe has a purpose. Remember, the energy of God, which flows through everything in a purposeful fashion, is also flowing through you.

Let me be very personal as an illustration. I accept that I was born in April 1931, and that with my birth, God had an overall purpose in life for me. I believe that I had and still have the power to choose to align myself with that purpose or to misalign myself. When I am in true alignment with my purpose, then life has a certain flow and joy that are absent when I am out of alignment. When the wheels of your automobile are out of alignment, the car is more difficult to drive, and the tires wear unevenly.

The specific details of each one of our purposes in life will vary, and how we live out our purposes will vary, but the overall and grand purpose for each one of us is the same. Jesus lived it, and he said it in many different ways, but a summary would go something like this: our purpose as spiritual beings having a human experience is to love God, and we do this mostly by loving others unconditionally, and this means giving and serving others in all kinds of ways.

Let me expand on this. Our purpose in life is to go beyond "outcome," which always asks, "What's in it for me?" It's to go beyond suffering, which always asks, "Why me?"

When you go beyond outcome in life, you find yourself unconcerned about what is in it for you. Thoughts, feelings, and behavior focus more and more on the fulfillment of your purpose. You go beyond success, achievement, and performance as indications of your life's mission. Instead, every moment is lived fully and lovingly. Material possessions cease to dominate your thoughts, which is not to say they disappear. They simply cease to be the focus of your life. Instead, your real purpose takes hold, and you gain a sense of joy and inner harmony knowing that you are divinely fulfilling your reason for being here.

There is an enormous irony that comes with discovering your true purpose in life and living it. The things that you previously believed to be so important lose their allure. You no longer care about what is coming your way, yet you find that those very things arrive in your life in larger and larger amounts. Remember, Jesus said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and God's

righteousness, and all these things will be yours as well." Joy, however, is not found in the arrival of these "rewards" but in the experience of thinking and acting purposefully. Giving becomes more important than getting because giving is in alignment with your true purpose.

When you are living your purpose and letting God's Spirit guide you, then you are truly flowing with life. You are able to go about your life's work free of worrisome thoughts.

Here are two simple suggestions that, if you put them into practice, will help you recover your spiritual heritage.

Spend some time each day in awe, in total complete awe. Look around you and see in amazement this creation, including yourself and others. Be in awe of the fact that you are part of the miracle of God's creation. Then be thankful. Be thankful for the organs of your body that function automatically, and for your amazing mind. A few minutes a day in total awe and thanksgiving will contribute to your spiritual awakening more than anything else you can do.

Begin each day by affirming, "I know that the Spirit of God is within me and that when I live out my purpose, my life will be one of fulfillment and joy." Amen.