Sunday, February 20, 1994
FINDING YOUR STRENGTHS (No. 3 in a Series: Living a God Directed Life)
Matthew 4:18-22

All of us struggle in life with three basic issues: the issue of identity — Who am I? The issue of importance — Do I matter? Does anyone care about me? Will I be missed when I'm gone? And the issue of impact — What is my place in life? What am I here for? Is my life making a difference for good while I'm here?

Today, in this third sermon in the series "Living a God-Directed Life," we're going to be examining another step in discovering how to find the right direction, the purpose for which God created you. Remember, this sermon series is based on the premise that God created you for a purpose, and when you live according to that purpose, your life is filled with joy and significance.

You will remember that last week, in the second sermon in this series, I said that just as a building needs to have a strong foundation if it is to be able to endure and fulfill its purpose, so too your life needs a solid foundation, and that foundation is integrity, which for Christians is comprised of values based on the life and teachings of Jesus.

As Christians, we believe that more than anyone else we know, Jesus revealed to us what living a God-directed life is all about. The values which Jesus lived and taught are to be the values on which we build our lives.

Once you are sure that the foundation of your life has the right values, the next step toward living a God-directed life is to discover your strengths, your talents, and your abilities so that you can use them to their fullest potential because then you are on the way to living a God-directed life. God didn't give you the talents you have to waste.

To find your unique strengths and abilities, the first step is to remind yourself that you are created in the image of God; you are a part of God's loving energy in the physical form of a human being, and you are a miracle.

Here are some of the facts we now know about each human being. Your brain can store 100 trillion facts. And when necessary, your mind can handle 15,000 decisions a second, as in the case when your digestive system is working after you've eaten. You can smell up to 10,000 different odors. Your touch can detect an item one twenty-five thousandth of an inch. You can taste one part of quinine in two million parts of water. You are an incredible creation of God. You were put on this earth to make a contribution to this world. Last week, at the Lincoln Symphony concert, I heard a cellist play from memory a beautiful concerto, and I marveled at the miracle of how his muscles and mind worked together.

The second step in finding your strengths and abilities so that you can fulfill God's purpose for your life is to do an inventory to discover the gifts God gave you. Just as a business does an inventory once a year or more frequently, so you also need to do an inventory periodically of the gifts God has given you because new gifts can be discovered within you throughout your life. You are always growing, evolving, and changing.

For example, as you grow and mature in the Christian faith, you will discover new spiritual gifts that you never before knew you possessed. So no matter what your age or where you are in life, you can always be finding new gifts and abilities and put them to good use.

I could give you countless examples of people who, in midlife or later, are now doing things that they would never have dreamed of doing when they were twenty or thirty.

God has given each one of us different interests and abilities. You've noticed that some things turn you on and get your attention and others do not. There are some things you have a strong interest in and other things that do not interest you at all.

We all have different natural abilities. Some of you are very good at math; others have trouble with it. Some of you are good with words; you find it easy to write out your deepest thoughts; others of you find that very difficult to do.

Some of you have a natural ability with animals; some of you are good with people; some of you have certain musical abilities; some people have an easier time with rhythm than others. Some of you have natural athletic ability; others have artistic talent; some of you have good mechanical ability. God made us all different. God has given each one of us the ability to do certain things well.

We all have different personalities. God loves variety and diversity. Some of you are introverts; others are extroverts. Some people have tremendous natural organizational ability; others could care less. Some of you love routine; others enjoy variety. Some people are more rational in their decision-making; others are more intuitive.

Success, therefore, according to God, is being the best that God made you to be — fulfilling your unique potential, using the gifts God has given you to improve life around you.

The third step in discovering your strengths and abilities so that you fulfill God's purpose for your life is to look at your past and learn from it. Look at patterns from your past to learn what you're good at doing. God has been a part of you since your birth. If you want to understand God's will for your future, you need to look at your past.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself: What have been the most enjoyable achievements in your life? In other words, what are the things you have done well and which you enjoyed? You might want to make a list of those. Begin with grade school and high school and young adulthood. Look for patterns. Ask yourself what you truly liked about those things? What made them so fulfilling? What skills are showing up here over and over again?

Let me be personal for a moment. I was convinced while still in high school that God wanted me to become a minister. Not only did that surprise my parents, brothers and sisters, relatives, and friends, but it surprised me. I truly felt God's call in my life, but it was more than that. As I considered that vocation, I also examined what my skills and abilities were. I enjoyed public speaking and entered every oratorical contest and debate tournament that I could, and the judges said that I was pretty good at it. I enjoyed working with people. Philosophical and theological questions intrigued me. Music inspired me. So not only did I feel a call from God, but I also felt that this call was confirmed by the gifts that God had given me.

The point is this — the more you understand how God has shaped you, the more you will understand God's purpose for your life.

The fourth step in discovering God's purpose for your life is to experiment. You have a number of gifts and talents that you do not know you possess because you have never been given the opportunity to try them. One of the beautiful things about doing volunteer work is that many people discover skills and abilities that they never knew they had before.

I remember a woman in the first church I served. Even though it's thirty-five years ago, I still remember her name — Joanne Albright. She volunteered to be the chair of the committee that was going to organize the dedication of our new little church building. Being a young woman and a new mother, she had never had the opportunity to do anything like that before. I watched in amazement as she brought that committee together, assigned tasks, and brought out the best in the people who were on that committee. She had a natural talent for organization and leadership. As her children grew up and she was able to do more work outside her home, she went on to use that newly discovered God-given gift in many ways for the betterment of the community in which she lived, and she came to have a sense of accomplishment and joy.

And I remember another young man who volunteered to teach a Sunday School class of 7th and 8th grade young people. He had never taught a class of any kind before. Because of that experiment in teaching, he discovered that he had a natural ability, and it was something he enjoyed immensely. A few years later, he went back to school, got a teaching degree, and became one of the best junior high teachers in the school system. God had given him a natural talent and love for teaching, which he never knew he had until he had a chance to experiment.

When you are using the skills and abilities that God has given you, then you are living a God-directed life, and the result is that you have amazing energy, confidence, and satisfaction.

You've noticed how much energy you have when you do things that you do well and that you also love to do. On the other hand, you have little energy when you are doing things you do not like to do and for which you have little ability. When you find your shape and begin to fulfill your life's mission, it's almost euphoric. You feel deep within yourself, "This is me, this is what I'm supposed to do. I fit." It's fun, and you feel fully alive.

A Christian thinker wrote centuries ago, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." It brings glory to God when you are truly you when you are fulfilling the potential God gave you. You are filled with energy.

A second result of doing what you were meant to do is that you have confidence. When you do what God made you to do, you're good at it. If God made you to be a salesperson, you're good at it. If God made you to be a dentist, you're good at it. If God gave you the ability to be a teacher, you're good at it, and so you have confidence.

The third result is satisfaction, meaning, fulfillment, and significance. Some people look in all the wrong places for satisfaction. You begin to be fully satisfied in life when you begin to be what God gave you the gifts to be.

Now, all of this sounds well and good, but here's a warning: there are at least two things which are barriers to doing what God's gifts have given you the ability to do.

The first barrier is comparing, and the second is conforming. You can be in danger when you begin to compare yourself to others and try to be just like them instead of fulfilling your

potential. The reason so many people have difficulty in living a God-directed life is because of comparing and conforming.

Comparing is always a trap because you focus so much of your time on what you are not rather than on what you are. Then you tend to overvalue what you are not and to undervalue what you are. You say, “I wish I was as talented as Marie,” or “I wish I had the athletic ability of Sandy, or the artistic ability of Peg.”

I can’t emphasize this enough: you need to spend less time focusing on what you are not good at and more time focusing on what you are good at. If you are always dissatisfied with the gifts and talents that God gave you, always complaining, saying, “I wish I had this or I wish I had that,” you will have difficulty living a God-directed life.

The other trap is the trap of conforming. To live a God-directed life means you’re probably going to have to stop fulfilling roles that other people are expecting you to fulfill. Not only does God want to direct your life, but so does everyone else. It’s entirely possible that in your desire to please other people, you have buried your own talents and interests.

Note too that as you grow and mature, you acquire additional skills. This can mean that living a God-directed life in a later stage of your life’s journey might be quite different from the God-directed life you lived in an earlier stage of your life’s journey. I believe it’s entirely possible that you can be fulfilling God’s purpose for your life, and by the time you die, you will have had three or more vocations — all of them worthwhile.

While it’s helpful to consult and listen to others as to what your skills and potential might be, sometimes so-called experts can make mistakes. I don’t know whether this information is accurate or not, but someone told me that Beethoven’s music teacher told him that “as a composer you’re hopeless.” Thomas Edison’s teacher said, “You’re so stupid, you’ll never learn anything.” Einstein’s math teacher was not impressed with his student’s ability. Walt Disney was fired from his first job on a newspaper because the editor said he had no creativity.

Remember above all, your life is too important to waste. God has a purpose for you. To discover that purpose, find your strengths and build on them. Some people discover that purpose more easily than others. The good news is that when you find God’s purpose for you, when you live a God-directed life, then you will also find maximum joy, peace, and fulfillment. Amen.