Sunday, February 27, 1994
DEFINING YOUR LIFE MISSION (No. 4 in a Series: Living a God Directed Life)
I John 4:7-12,18-21

Sometimes it seems to me that if most of us drove our cars the way we live our lives, we'd never get out of the driveway. We are, in some ways, like the performer in the circus who spins plates on the tops of poles. He gets one going, then starts another, and yet another, keeping each one spinning so that by the time he gets to number ten, he has to rush back to the first one because it has slowed down and is about to fall off the pole.

Many people live their lives that way. They have no overall purpose except to keep as many things going as possible, and their energy is dissipated on a wide range of projects and activities.

However, if you are truly living a God-directed life, you have clarified and refined your values so that they are eternal, based on the life and teachings of Jesus. You have also taken an inventory and discovered your strengths. You know what your gifts are, the abilities that God has given you. You know what you do very well and what you truly enjoy doing, and you build on these strengths and use them to the best of your ability while managing your weaknesses. In other words, you can concentrate on what you do best and what you believe God wants you to do, without needing to keep all those plates spinning on top of those poles.

I have been saying throughout this sermon series that God has made you and every human being for a purpose, and when you find that purpose and live it, your life is filled with joy and satisfaction because you know you are living a God-directed life.

Now you're ready for the next step, which is to begin more accurately defining your life mission. To do that, you need to prepare a mission statement that expresses your values, makes use of your strengths, and gives direction to your life.

To illustrate how important a step this is, take this congregation as an example. Almost 19 years ago, First-Plymouth Church paid off the remaining debt it had incurred when it built the east wing addition, which includes the chapel and additional space for early childhood education. At that point, the Church Council appointed a long-range planning committee to begin charting the congregation's future, both short-term and long-term.

After several meetings, this committee had trouble finding a direction and decided that the most important task it could undertake was to write a mission statement. This mission statement would take into account the purpose of the church since its founding by Jesus in the first century and the unique history and strengths of this congregation. After much study and discussion, the committee wrote a proposed mission statement and presented it to the entire congregation for its study and discussion. This mission statement was then formally adopted by the annual meeting of the congregation in 1976, and it has helped define our direction and purpose ever since.

That's what we also need to do with our lives — define our mission as we understand it, taking into account our basic values, our strengths and abilities, and the fact that God created us for a purpose.

If you had to define your life in one word, what word would you choose? Hectic? Diffused? Lacking focus? Busy? Fun? How many of you would say “purposeful” or “focused”? Near the end of his life, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus summed up his life mission with these words in one of his prayers to God: “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.”

I have said many times before that the overall purpose of human beings, according to the Christian faith, is to bring glory to God. “What is the chief end of human beings?” asks the first question in the Westminster Catechism, and the answer is: “To glorify God and enjoy God forever.” You bring glory to God when you fulfill your life’s purpose, when you live a God-directed life. You bring glory to God when the world is better off because you lived in it. You bring glory to God when you use your strengths and abilities to their fullest potential.

The problem is, many people go through life and never discover their life mission.

What is a life mission? Here’s a simple definition: A life mission is a description of what I believe God wants me to do with my life.

Here are several statements that may help explain it better. Your life mission is more than a goal. Some people confuse a goal with a life mission. In fact, if you ask most people, “What’s your purpose in life?” they will often answer with a goal. What’s your purpose in life? To retire.

That’s a goal, not a purpose. What’s your purpose in life? To have a net worth of one million dollars when I die. That’s a goal, not a purpose. What’s your goal in life? To own a house and have a family. That’s a nice goal, but it’s not a purpose.

You can have many goals but still have no purpose in life. You can be like that man in the circus — you can have lots of things spinning, be very busy, but still lack an overall purpose except to keep all those things spinning.

Goals are fine; we need them. But they need to contribute toward an overall life mission.

A second statement: Your life mission should use your God-given potential as fully as possible. It will use your personality, your experiences, your spiritual gifts, your abilities and talents, your heart, and your passion. God has given you all of these things so that you can use them for the good of all. It will help express fully who you are.

The third statement that helps define your life mission is that it clarifies your roles. You have many different roles in life in many different seasons. Sometimes you have a role as a student. If you get married, you have a role as a marriage partner. If you have children, you have a role as a parent. Wherever you work, you have a role as a professional. You have a role as a friend and family member. In the many different areas of your life, you have different roles.

If you are a parent right now, part of your life mission is to nurture and raise those children in the best way possible. Your life mission includes all these roles together. It includes your career. However, your overall life mission is more than any of the roles you live out during your life. For example, you can lose your job, but that does not mean you have lost your life mission. If your identity is totally wrapped up in your job, that’s not an adequate life mission — it is too narrowly defined.

How then do you discover your life mission? That's the main theme of today's sermon. For those of us who call ourselves Christians, our main source for finding our life mission is the life and teachings of Jesus.

No other human being can tell you your specific mission in life. Other people can help you discover it, of course. After all, Jesus taught that we most frequently experience God's Spirit and even God's direction, or that which we call the Holy Spirit, in the company of other believers. However, there are some questions you can ask that can lead you to discover your life mission. These questions are based on what Jesus taught and lived.

The first question is this: What is or will be the center of your life? There are many options. You could center your life around your career. Many people do that. You could center your life around your family. Some people do that. You could center your life around making money. You could center your life around pleasure. You could center your life around becoming well-known, becoming famous. But as I mentioned before, none of these things are eternal.

According to Jesus, God is to be the center of your life. Why? You were created because of God's love. You were made to be loved by God, and God's love is there always. You can never stop God from loving you. The Bible says, "God is love." Now, love is not really love unless it is bestowed on someone, unless it is put into action. Love is a verb more than a noun. God made you to love you. God wants that love to become active in your life, and the only way it can become active is by loving God in return, and you do this by loving others. The Bible says that "anyone who says they love God and hates another human being is a liar."

One day, when someone asked Jesus which commandment was the most important, he replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The second question is this: What is or will be the character of my life? What am I going to be? God is as much interested in who you are as in what you do. Just as you grow and mature physically and mentally, God wants you to grow in character. God wants you to grow spiritually. What kind of character are you to become? According to the Bible, you are to become like Christ. Jesus is our teacher and our example. Hopefully, you will come to think like Jesus and act like Jesus.

How do you know when you are becoming like Jesus? St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." When your life exhibits these characteristics, you are becoming like Jesus.

How do you grow spiritually? How do you grow in character? Sometimes it comes about by being in opposite situations. It's easy to love people who are loving. We truly begin to grow spiritually when we learn to live and love unloving people. It's easy to be joyful when others are joyful and when things are going well. But in times of difficulty and when we are with people lacking joy, then we can grow spiritually with inward joy. How about having inner peace? Try cultivating inner peace in the midst of a traffic jam when you're in a hurry to get somewhere. Or how about learning inner peace when you have five children and they are crabby all night? In these and many other trying situations, our character can be built.

A third question to ask in order to discover God's purpose for your life, or in other words, your life mission, is this one: What will be the contribution of my life? What am I going to do with my

God-given talents? You aren't put here on earth only to take. You were put here to give. You were put here to make a contribution with your life. You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give.

Nobody is ever remembered for what they took out of life. We build statues to people for what they gave in life. I've never seen a statue or memorial anywhere dedicated to what a person took from life. Abundant living comes from abundant giving.

How do I know what my contribution is?

Look at the gifts God has given you. What are you good at? What do you enjoy doing? Some people contribute works of art. Some people contribute simple human kindness in difficult relationships, and they are especially good at that. The Bible says: "God has given each one of you some special abilities; be sure to use them to help each other, passing on to others God's many kinds of blessings." (1 Peter 4:10)

A fourth question to ask is what will be the communication of my life? What will be the message your life teaches? What do you want God to say to the world through you? What is the message your life is communicating to others now?

For example, some of you have a passion for protecting the environment, and thus maybe your life's message is to encourage others to be concerned about the environment.

You might discover your life's message from your problems and the way you deal with them. I remember hearing a young mother tell how her life purpose changed after having a child born with Down syndrome. In addition to seeing her purpose as helping her child grow, mature, and deal with life as best as possible, another part of that purpose was to be of help to other parents who faced similar challenges, and she continues to do that.

She said that she came to understand the word "retarded" in a new way. It does not mean that the child is stupid or dumb, but "retarded" means "slow." Take music as an example. When the instructions above the notes tell you to retard, you are to slow down. That doesn't mean that part of the music is dumb or stupid or that it is any less important than the part that's faster. This mother discovered a whole new life message because of her son with Down syndrome, and she's living that message.

What are you going to do with the rest of your life? I suggest that you center it around the love of God as revealed in Jesus, that you begin working on character, that you look at the contribution you can make based on your talents and abilities, and that you discover your life's message and live it. Amen.