Sunday February 27, 1994

DEFINING YOUR LIFE MISSION I John 4:7-12, 18-21

(No. 4 in a series: Living A God Directed Life)

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 top of poles. He gets one going and then he starts another one and yet another one and keeps starting new ones so that by the time he gets to number ten, he has to start the first one all over again because it has slowed down and is about to fall off the top of the pole.

Many people live their lives that way. They have

no over-all purpose except to keep as many things going as possible and their energy is dissipated on a whole range of projects and activities.

However, if you are truly living a God directed life, you have clarifed and refined your values so that you have values that are eternal because they are based on the life and teachings of Jesus. You also have taken an inventory and have 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 and at the same time are able to manage your weaknesses. In other words, you are able to concentrate on what you do best and what you believe God wants you to do and you don't have

to keep all those plates spinning on the 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 and that is to begin to more accurately define your life mission. To do that you need to prepare a mission statement that expresses your values and 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. Amost 19 years

ago, First- Plymouth Church paid off the remaining debt that it had incurred when it built the east wing building addition that includes the chapel and the added space for early childhood education. At that point the Church Council appointed a long range planning committee for the purpose of beginning to chart the congregation's future both short term and long term.

After several meetings, this committee had trouble finding a direction and because of this decided that the most important task it could undertake was to write a mission statement which took 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 out a proposed mission statement and

presented it to the whole congregation for its study and discussion. This mission statement was then formally adopted by the annual meeting of the congregation in 1976, and has helped us 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 purpopse.

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 (God) glory on earth by completing the work you have given 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 abilites to their fullest potential.

The problem is, many people go all 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 which 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 frequently answer with a goal. What's your purpose in life? To retire. That's a goal, it's 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, you're very busy, but can 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 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 which helps define your life mission is: 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.There are however some questions you can ask which

can lead you in your discovery of 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 to love God in return and you do this by loving others. The Bible says that "anyone who says he or she loves 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 will 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 what 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 Je-

sus.

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 and 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 in 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." (I 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's Syndrome. In addition to seeing as her purpose in helping her child grow and mature and to be able to deal with life as best as possible, another part of that purpose was to be of help to other parents who faced similar problems 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's 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 and that you begin working on character; begin looking at the contribution you can make based on your talents and abilities, and discovering what is your life's message and live it. Amen.