Sunday, March 20, 1994
SUSTAINING YOUR LIFE MISSION (No. 6 in a Series: Living a God Directed Life)
Luke 14:28-31

Why did God create you? Our Christian faith teaches that God created you for a purpose. If so, how do you find that purpose in your life? What does it mean to live a God-directed life?

What are some of the barriers and enemies that get in your way? These are some of the overall questions I've been dealing with in this sermon series.

In the first sermon in this series, I reminded you that every human being is driven or directed by something, by some purpose. For example, some people are driven by guilt, others by fear, still others by anger, greed, or resentment. Some people are driven by their past, and they let it control their future. Some are driven by peer pressure.

This sermon series is based on the premise that the life that really matters, the life that is filled with joy, is directed first and foremost by God. The tragedy is that many people go through their entire lives without learning what God's purpose is for them.

In previous sermons, I pointed out some of the benefits that come from living a God-directed life. It reduces your frustration because it helps you make the right choices in a world of increasing choices. It increases your motivation because you have a reason to live. Living a God-directed life helps your concentration, your focus. Furthermore, a God-directed life attracts cooperation. It is, above all, a life of satisfaction and joy.

You begin to live a God-directed life by believing that God created you for a purpose. Building the foundation for a God-directed life is the next important step, and you do this by assessing your values and then choosing eternal values on which to build your life's foundation.

The fact is that many of the values on which people base their lives are superficial values from the culture. You adopt many of these values without questioning them. If you are going to live a God-directed life, you need to be sure that the values that form the foundation of your life are the same as those taught and lived by Jesus. Living a God-directed life frequently begins with a shift in values. To find God's purpose for your life, you need also to assess your strengths, your talents, your abilities, the gifts that God has given you. Since God created you for a purpose, using those strengths and gifts in the best way possible helps you to live out God's purpose for you.

Once you have begun building a strong foundation for your life and know your strengths, talents, and gifts, you are on the way to defining your life mission. I explained that step in some detail in the fourth sermon in this series.

In sermons five and six, we examined some of the enemies or barriers that keep you from living a God-directed life. One of them is envy, and another is the fear of failure.

Today, in sermon number seven, the subject is how to maintain and sustain your life mission over the long haul. It's one thing to make a good start, to have a fine beginning, but it's another to sustain that momentum.

We live in a culture today that, perhaps more than any other time in history, has stressed the value of a good start. To give a child a good start, we are told, is one of the most important gifts that can be given to a young life. And we all recognize the truth in this idea, but it is not the whole truth.

I see so many people who have had the benefit of a fine beginning, but there has been no follow-through. The character quality of endurance is lacking. I know parents who never missed a parent-teacher conference when their child was in preschool, kindergarten, first and second grade. But as that child grew older, there was less interest.

I see so many people who make a good start on their spiritual journey but falter and give up along the way. Probably some of you, on some Saturday evenings or Sunday mornings, don't feel like coming to the worship services. Remember the story of the man whose mother had trouble getting him out of bed one Sunday morning to go to church. Finally, in desperation, his mother said to him, "Give me two good reasons why you don't want to go to church this morning." The man replied, "First, they don't like me, and second, I don't like them." Then he said to his mother, "Now you give me at least two good reasons why I should go." His mother said, "First of all, you're 40 years old, and second, you're the minister."

What then are some of the steps you can take to help you sustain your life mission? That's the main theme of today's sermon. The first step is to learn to manage your feelings, your moods. Let me be personal for a moment. What has helped me to be able to more effectively deal with my feelings and moods is remembering an incident from the life of Harry Emerson Fosdick, which I discovered when reading his autobiography, The Living of These Days. I bought the book and read it in October 1956, and I still have it in my library.

The story that helped me from that book is one I've used many times before in sermons, and I keep using it because of the truth it reveals. I recall it often within my own mind to help me transcend my feelings of the moment so that I can better sustain my life mission.

Here's what happened to Fosdick when he was in high school. One morning, as his father, who was a schoolteacher, was leaving for school, he turned to Harry's mother as he was walking down the front walk and, waving goodbye, said so that Harry, who was also in the doorway, could hear it, "Tell Harry he can cut the grass today after school if he feels like it." Then, after a few more steps, he turned again and, with a big smile on his face, said, "Tell Harry he had better feel like it." Years later, in a short article in Reader's Digest, Harry Emerson Fosdick called that the best advice ever given him. He said he never forgot it. It even helped him recover from a serious nervous breakdown early in his career.

The key word here is "feel." As a human being, you are a creature of feeling and emotion, as well as a creature of reason. That's an important part of being human. You laugh, cry, feel happy, and feel sad. You often say, "I don't feel like it." Or to explain some action or attitude, you say, as if to excuse yourself, "I don't know, I just felt like doing that."

I'm not suggesting that you should deny your feelings all the time or that you shouldn't have them. They are a part of what makes you wonderfully human. What you have to learn is that you can't make all of your decisions based on your feelings of the moment. Many things in life cannot be trusted to your feelings. Your feelings can frequently deceive you.

I remember the first time I had major surgery. Once I was back in my hospital room and had mostly recovered from the anesthetic, the nurse suggested I get out of bed and begin to walk. I

didn't feel like it, and I probably said that. But I was strongly encouraged to do it anyway because it helped speed the healing process. If I had waited until I felt like it, I would've spent many more days in the hospital than I needed to.

Fosdick recalled that many times on a Tuesday morning, when he knew it was time to begin work on next Sunday's sermon, he didn't feel like it, but then his father's words would come back to him: "Tell Harry he'd better feel like it." He would settle down and begin work on the sermon regardless of the feelings of the moment. And he discovered the amazing fact that once you begin to act, your feelings will follow along. Professional writers say that the only way they can continue to make a living by writing is to write every day for a specified period, whether they feel like it or not. And the hardest part is getting started, putting that first word on paper.

You've heard me say many times before, "It is easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting." When you read the stories of Jesus in the New Testament, you discover he always asked people to take some action. When a young man asked him, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus did not tell him to go away and meditate, or think about it, or even pray about it; rather, he said, "Go, sell all you have, and give the money to the poor, and then come and follow me." Frequently, as Jesus healed a person, he would give instructions for action: "Go and show yourselves to the priest." "Rise, take up your bed and walk." "Go, and sin no more."

The second step in building endurance so that you can sustain your life mission is to break through your quitting points.

I'm personally not a runner or a jogger, but friends of mine who are tell me that the way they build endurance in running is to break through quitting points. Let's say your goal is to jog twenty laps on the track. You've been working up to this over a period of time. By the 18th lap, you think you're not able to jog another yard. You're at a quitting point, but you keep to your goal of 20 laps and break through that quitting point. Our lives are filled with quitting points, and every time we break through them, we are building endurance. When we keep on going even though we don't feel like it, when we stick to a job until it's finished, we are building endurance.

Think about the spiritual quitting points in your life, those spiritual dry spells when God seems far away and you want to give up on God. That is when you most need to keep your spiritual disciplines of regular weekly worship and prayer, and when you do, you are breaking through a spiritual quitting point and building endurance.

The third step in sustaining your life mission is to continually build on your strengths. I've talked about this before in this sermon series. The talents, abilities, and gifts you possess are what reveal more than anything else God's purpose for your life. God didn't give you these things to waste but to use for God's glory and the world's benefit. The more you use and improve these gifts, the more they will multiply, and the more you will be sustaining your life mission. Keep learning and growing all through your life.

The fourth step in endurance and for sustaining your God-directed life mission is to establish and maintain strong, healthy relationships with those people who have similar values and are also committed to living out their own life purpose. These are what "support groups" do. God has not created us to be alone but to be in supporting relationships with one another. We are interdependent creatures.

The quality of your life and your ability to sustain your life mission over the long haul will be in direct proportion to the type of human relationships you choose to build in your life.

These quality relationships can be found in several different categories. First of all, you need to have role models to inspire you, individuals after whom you try to pattern your life. Jesus was a very strong role model for the first disciples and can be for us. He said to them at one point, as recorded in the Gospel of John, “I have given you an example to follow; do as I have done to you.”

If you’re a seamstress or a tailor, you know what a pattern is. Why do you use a pattern? Because it saves time, makes the task easier, and reduces the number of mistakes.

The quickest way to achieve your goals in life is to find a model who has already done it. It’s human nature to imitate.

As a baby and young child, all the early learning you do is through imitation. The problem with that is, as a child, you didn’t get to choose your models. They were those that were closest to you. If you had good models, you were fortunate; if they were bad models, you learned many things you shouldn’t have learned. As young people and adults, we can choose our models. Every great leader in history had a model. Models can help us break through barriers. They inspire us.

Who are your models? Who are your heroes or heroines? After whom do you model your life?

A second category of human relationships that can be crucial in helping you to sustain your life mission is to have one or more mentors who teach you. Mentors are personal coaches who help bring out the best in you. I had a wonderful model and mentor while in seminary, a minister with whom I worked for three years in a parish, and he taught me more than any other person during that period of my life.

You need mentors and advisors throughout your life. I have colleagues from whom I learn something new all the time. They are my mentors. I have mentors from all walks of life. They help me sustain my life mission.

Third, not only do you need good role models and mentors, but you need to be part of a community of people with whom you can worship, sing, laugh, and play. The church is, above all, to be that kind of loving, supporting community. Nothing is more important in helping you sustain your life mission than being an active participant in such a loving and supportive community. That’s why I continually urge you to be regular in your worship attendance.

In fact, much of your meaning and purpose in life comes from your relationships with others. Your life begins to lose meaning, purpose, and direction most rapidly when you become estranged from others. The deepest desire of each human being is to be at one with someone, to have someone be at one with us.

St. Augustine once wrote about God and human beings: “Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” But that is not all there is to it. Another Christian thinker later added to Augustine’s statement: “Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and for one another, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee, in one another, and in one another in thee.”

Our relationships are so crucial that they affect our physical and emotional health. One study recently showed that almost all the patients admitted to a general hospital with organic illness during a one-month period had sustained some emotional crisis involving loss of meaning and purpose, which always involved a crisis in human relationships as well. That's why reconciliation is such a big word in the Christian faith.

Sometime on radio or television, I hope to hear the following commercial: What do doctors recommend? In a recent survey, three out of four doctors recommended a restored human relationship or becoming part of a group of concerned, accepting, loving persons as remedies for nagging backache, headaches, and one of a number of other ailments.

Dr. Paul Tournier, the Swiss physician, wrote that his research showed that the crucial element in mental health, and in our overall health as well, is the degree of openness and communion that a person has with other human beings.

In order to live a God-directed life and sustain your life mission over the long haul, you need (1) to learn to manage your feelings and your moods, (2) to break through your quitting points, (3) to continue to build on your strengths, and (4) to establish and maintain positive, healthy human relationships. These relationships fall into three categories: role models, mentors, and being part of a loving, forgiving, and supporting community that has God at its center — the church. Amen.