Sunday, July 28, 1996
FINDING YOUR PURPOSE IN LIFE
Matthew 13:44-52

“He or she who has a why to live can bear with almost any how.”

In his book Modern Man in Search of a Soul, Dr. Carl Jung made a profound observation about the many people who came to him for help: “About a third of my cases are suffering from no clinically definable neurosis, but from the senselessness and emptiness of their lives. This can be described as the general neurosis of our time.”

I believe Carl Jung was correct in his assessment, not only in his time but in ours as well. Our lives hunger for purpose.

We ask the purpose question in many ways. We wonder: is there anything more to life than simply being alive — eating, sleeping, working, struggling to make ends meet?

Our lives go on day after day. They may be successful or unsuccessful, full of pleasure or full of worry, but do they have any purpose?

Although we human beings have much in common with other living organisms and animals, one big difference is our ability to ask, “What does life mean?” or “What is the purpose of my life?” We also have the freedom and ability to choose what attitude we will take toward the circumstances of our lives, be they good or bad.

Do you suppose that a cow grazing contentedly in the pasture ever asks itself — or another cow—“What is my purpose in life?”

I read the other day about an insect, a particular kind of moth with no mouth, a species of caterpillar that lays its eggs and then changes into a moth that has no digestive system, no way of taking in food, so it starves to death within a few hours. Nature designed this moth to reproduce, lay eggs, and pass on the life of the species. Once it has done that, it has no reason to go on living, so it is programmed to die.

Are we like that? Do we live only to produce children, to perpetuate the human race? And, having done that, is it our destiny to disappear and make room for the next generation? Or is there a purpose to our existence beyond simply existing? Does our being alive matter? Would your disappearance leave the world poorer or just less crowded? Will your life have added something of value to the world?

These are difficult questions to ask and answer. We can put off considering them for a while, especially when we are young and busy with education, career, and family decisions. But sooner or later, we will come face to face with such questions as, “What am I supposed to do with my life?” How shall I live so that my life will mean something more than a brief flash of biological existence, soon to disappear forever?

There’s a mystery to our existence in the first place. Dr. Lewis Thomas has written in one of his essays, “Statistically, the probability of any one of us being here in the first place is so small that you’d think the mere fact of existing would keep us all in a contented dazzlement of

surprise. We are alive against the stupendous odds of genetics, infinitely outnumbered by all the alternates who might, except for luck, be in our place."

Even more astounding is our statistical improbability in physical terms. The normal, predictable state of matter throughout the universe is randomness, a relaxed sort of equilibrium, with atoms and their particles scattered around in an amorphous muddle. We, in brilliant contrast, are completely organized structures, full of information at every covalent bond.

There is both mystery and purpose to our existence, but finding that purpose is often the problem.

Alfred Nobel, a Swedish chemist, made a fortune by inventing more powerful explosives and licensing the formula to governments to make weapons. One day, Nobel's brother died, and a newspaper accidentally printed an obituary for Alfred instead. It identified him as the inventor of dynamite and the man who made a fortune by enabling armies to achieve new levels of mass destruction.

Nobel had the unique opportunity to read his own obituary in his lifetime and see what he would be remembered for. He was shocked to think that this was what his life would add up to — to be remembered as a merchant of death and destruction. He took his fortune and used it to establish the Nobel Prizes, awarded for accomplishments in various fields that benefit humanity. Today, he is remembered for those prizes, not for his explosives.

When Nobel was most successful, he was working against life and friendship. Then he realized what he would leave behind if that were all he did, so he gave the last part of his life another direction.

I remember a man who came to see me some years ago — someone I had never met before. He telephoned and said he had to talk with someone about a problem. His story, as I remember it, went something like this:

Several weeks earlier, he had attended the funeral of a man his age. He didn't know him well, but they worked for the same company and had children of the same age. The man had died suddenly over the weekend. The man who came to see me had gone to the funeral with some colleagues, and they were all thinking the same thing: "It could have been me."

He told me that the man who died had already been replaced at the office, and his wife was moving out of state to be near her parents. He said, "Two weeks ago he was working 50 feet from me, and now it's as if he never existed. I've hardly slept at all since then. I can't stop thinking that it could happen to me, that one day it will happen to me, and a few days later I'll be forgotten, as if I never lived. Shouldn't a person's life be more than that?"

The need for purpose in life is part of all of us. It's one of our deepest needs. Life is empty without it.

Surely this is what Jesus was talking about in the two parables from the Gospel of Matthew. He said, and I'm paraphrasing, "Finding God's purpose for you is like a treasure hidden in a field. Someone finds it and covers it up; then in joy, they go and sell all that they have to buy that field."

Here is someone who one day stumbles upon the purpose of their life and immediately recognizes its value.

The second parable is about a merchant in search of fine pearls who, upon finding one of great value, sells all that he has to buy it.

In both cases, according to Jesus, finding God's purpose for your life is like that.

But how do you discover your life's purpose?

The answer to that question can't be given in general terms. Although God has a general purpose for all of us—"The chief purpose of human beings is to glorify God and enjoy God forever," as the Westminster Catechism puts it — finding the specific purpose of life differs for each person, from day to day and even from hour to hour. What matters is not only knowing God's general purpose for life but also discovering your specific purpose at a given moment. Asking only in general terms is like asking a master chess player, "Tell me, sir, what is the best chess move in the world?" There is no such thing as the best move apart from the specific situation in the game.

The same holds true for human existence. It's not enough to search for a general purpose in life. Each of us has a concrete assignment to fulfill.

Sometimes we find God's purpose for us right in the middle of our everyday lives but don't recognize the treasure at first. I recall a middle-aged man who said, "I've done nothing with my life. When I was young, I honestly thought I would one day be governor of my home state. I've not come close. It's terrible to discover how ordinary I am."

Yet this man had raised a family, been a productive member of his profession, achieved leadership in his community and church, and had contributed more to the world than he had taken from it. He had walked right over the treasure in the field and hadn't recognized it for what it was.

Another time I was with a family preparing for the funeral of an elderly woman, and one of her daughters said, "I suppose she never did all that much, but we sure loved her, and she sure loved us." I smiled and said, "That sounds like a very good epitaph to me." I believe she found the treasure hidden in the field.

There are times in our lives when the treasure of God's purpose is right in front of us, yet we don't see it because we are looking for something more spectacular.

Rabbi Kushner, in one of his books, puts it this way: "What is life about? It is not about writing great books, amassing great wealth, achieving great power. It is about loving and being loved. It is about enjoying your food and sitting in the sun rather than rushing through lunch and hurrying back to the office. It is about savoring the beauty of moments that don't last — the sunsets, the leaves turning color, the rare moments of human communication. It is about savoring them rather than missing out on them because we are so busy."

And the deeper truth, according to Jesus, is that you will find the hidden treasure or the pearl of great value — God's purpose for your life — as you serve others. It is when we are connected to others in acts of love that we are most connected to God — a simple truth we

often forget. You will find the deepest purpose in your life as you work with others to make this world better.

God's purpose for you is not found in the pomp and glory of the world but in humble, quiet places and wherever justice and mercy are being cultivated.

Some people, like the individual in the first parable, stumble upon this truth like stumbling onto a treasure hidden in a field — they weren't consciously searching for God's purpose in their life, but they found it anyway.

Others of us are more like the merchant in search of the pearl of great value — we spend a lot of time looking for God's purpose in our lives, go down many dead-end roads, and only later do we find the pearl of great value, more often than not right near home.

A wise person once asked a friend, "Whenever I see you, you're always in a hurry. Tell me, where are you running all the time?" His friend answered, "I'm running after success; I'm running after fulfillment; I'm running after the reward for all my hard work." The wise man replied, "That's a good answer if you assume that all those blessings are ahead of you, trying to elude you, and if you run fast enough, you might catch up with them. But isn't it possible that those blessings are behind you, looking for you? The more you run, the harder you make it for them to find you."

Here are several principles to keep in mind as you continue to discover God's purpose for your life:

Live with the question: What is the best I can do for God?
Use the wisdom God gives you and the wisdom of friends and the Christian community.

Be prepared for God's guidance on a particular issue to appear when you are ready for it. When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.

Be prepared for God to direct you to do something you thought you wouldn't like.

Sometimes you will make mistakes, but a wrong decision is not the end of everything. Some people live as if one wrong turn means they're lost forever.

God's purpose for you is not always a straight line. Be prepared for sharp turns and detours. Remember, as someone said, "The bend in the road is not the end of the road unless you fail to make the turn."

Amen.