Book 32

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 had this to say about the many people that came to him for help. "About a third of my cases are suffering from no clinically defineable neurosis, but from the senselessness and emptiness of their lives. This can be described as the general neurosis of our time."

I'm sure that Carl Jung was correct in his assessment of people not only in his time, but in our time as well. Our lives are hungry 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 that we have the 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 are going to take toward the circumstances of our lives, be they good or bad.

Do you suppose that the cow grazing contentedly in the pasture ever asks itself or asks 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 that it starves to death within a few hours. Nature has designed this moth to reproduce, to lay eggs and pass on the life of the species. Once it has done that, it has no reason to go on living, so that 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 simply less crowded? Will your life have added something of value to the world?

These are difficult questions to ask and answer and we can put off considering them for awhile, especially when we are young and busy with educational, 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, squirming with information at every covalent bond."

There is both mystery and purpose to our existence, and finding the purpose is frequently 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 one newspaper by accident printed an obituary notice 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 to 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 awards for accomplishments in various fields which would benefit humanity, and it is for that, not for his explosives, that he is most remembered today. When Nobel was most successful, he was working against life and against friendship. Then he realized what he would leave behind if that were all he did and 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 gone to a funeral for

a man of his age. He didn't know him that 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 other people in the company and they were all thinking the same thing. "It could've 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 will be forgotten as if I never lived. Shouldn't a person's life be more than that?"

The need for purpose in life, it's 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 read earlier 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 and which someone found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

Here is an individual who one day stumbled onto the purpose for his life and immediately recognized the value.

The second parable is about a merchant in search of fine pearls who on finding one pearl of

great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

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

But how do you do that? How to you discover your life's purpose?

The answer to the question of what is your purpose or meaning in life, cannot be answered in general terms. Although God has an overall general purpose for all of us as the Westminster catechism puts it, "the chief purpose of human beings is to glorify God and enjoy God forever," finding the specific purpose of life differs from individual to individual, from day to day and even from hour to hour. What matters therefore, is not

only knowing God's purpose for life in general, but also finding the specific purpose for your life at a given moment. To only ask the question in general is comparable to asking a master chess player, "Tell me, sir, what is the best chess move in the world?" There simply is no such thing as the best or even a good move apart from a particular situation in a game and the particular personality of one's opponent.

The same holds true for human existence. It is not enough to search only for a general purpose in life. Each one must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment.

Sometimes we find God's purpose for us right in the middle of our everyday life but don't recognize the treasure at first. I recall a man of middle

age who said to me, "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 a profession, achieved leadership in his community and church, and all in all had contributed more to the world than he had taken from it. He had walked right over the treasure in the field and had not recognized it for what it was.

Another time I was with a family making preparations for the funeral of an elderly woman, and one of her daughters said to me, "I suppose she never did all that much, but we sure loved her

and she sure loved us." I smiled and suggested, "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 there before us and yet we do not see it because we are looking for something which we think of as being 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 the rare moments of

human communication. It is about savoring them rather than missing out on them because we are so busy and they will not hold until we get around to them."

And the further truth is this, according to Jesus, you will find the hidden treasure or the pearl of great value, God's purpose for your life as you go about serving others. It is when we are connected to others in acts of love that we are most connected to God--a simple truth we frequently forget. You will find the deepest purpose in your life as you work with others to make this world better.

It is not to be 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 kind of stumble onto this truth like stumbling onto a treasure hidden in a field--they were't consciously searching for God's purpose in their life, but 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 life and go down many dead-end roads, and only later in life do we find the pearl of great value, and more likely than not, we find it not in some far off place, but 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 then said, "That's a good answer if you assume that all those blessings are somewhere 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, that they are looking for you and 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.

1. Live with the question: what is the best I can do for God?

2. Use the wisdom God gives you and the

corporate wisdom of friends and the Christian community.

3. Be prepared for God's guidance on a particular issue not to appear until you are ready for it. When the pupil is ready, a teacher will appear.

4. Be prepared for God to direct you to do something you thought you would not like.

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

6. God's purpose for you is not always in 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.