Sunday, July 28, 2002
MUSTARD SEED, TREASURE AND PEARL
Matthew 13:31-33,44-46

I will never forget a middle-aged man who came to see me some years ago when I was serving a church in the St. Louis area. It was the first time I had met this man. He telephoned for an appointment and told me that he had to talk with me about a personal issue.

When we met in my office the next morning, he told me that several weeks earlier, he had gone to the funeral of a man his age. He didn't know the man who had died very well, but they had worked for the same company and had children of the same age. The man had died unexpectedly over a weekend. The man who came to see me had gone to the funeral with some other people from 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 closer to her parents. He said, "Three weeks ago, this person was working not more than 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 could happen to me. One day I will die, and a few weeks or months later, I will be forgotten as if I never lived. Shouldn't a person's life be more than that?"

This man had a deep emptiness in his life. In his book Modern Man in Search of a Soul, Dr. Carl Jung had this to say about many of the 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 in their lives. This can be described as the general neurosis of our time."

I'm sure Carl Jung was correct in his assessment of many people, not only in his time but in our time and long before that. The life of each human being is hungry for purpose. This longing exhibits itself in many ways. You wonder, isn't there supposed to be something more to life than simply being alive — eating, sleeping, working, struggling to make ends meet?

Although human beings have much in common with other living organisms and animals, one big difference is that you have the ability to ask, "What does life mean?" or "What is the purpose of my life?" Sometimes, when I'm driving out in the country and see cattle grazing contentedly, I wonder, do these cattle ever ask themselves or others, "What is the purpose of my 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 so designed this insect to reproduce, to lay eggs, and pass on the life of the species. But once it has done that, it has no reason to go on living, so it is programmed to die.

Are human beings in any way like that? Do we live only to produce other human beings so as to perpetuate the human species? And having done that, is it our destiny to disappear and make room for the next generation? Or is there a purpose to your life beyond simply existing? Does your 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 you can put off considering them for a while, especially when you are young and busy with educational, career, and family decisions. But sooner or later, you will come face to face with such questions as, “What am I supposed to be doing with my life? Am I living so that my life will mean something more than a brief flash of biological existence soon to disappear forever?”

Let’s admit it. There’s a mystery to our existence to begin with. 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 alternatives who might, except for luck, be in our place.”

Your Christian faith tells you that there is both mystery and purpose to your existence. Finding the purpose is frequently the problem.

Alfred Nobel, a Swedish chemist, made a fortune by inventing more powerful explosives and licensing the formulas 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 is 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.

The need for meaningful purpose in life, the right kind of purpose, is a part of all of us. It is one of your deepest needs. Life is empty without it. Notice I said “meaningful” or the “right kind” of purpose. Each one of you has some kind of purpose for living, but it might not be a valuable one, one that will stand the test of time, one that will satisfy your deepest spiritual hunger. Here’s an individual whose sole purpose in life is greed — getting all he can get for himself. Here’s another person whose dominating purpose in life is hate and revenge. Someone wronged him long ago, and he cannot forget it. Or, as the cliché goes, he believes he cannot find “closure” until that person is dead and gone.

In the parables of the mustard seed, the treasure hidden in a field, and the valuable pearl, Jesus was talking about finding God’s true purpose for your life. He said — and I’m paraphrasing—“The kingdom of heaven, which can be defined as finding God’s purpose for you, is like the mustard seed; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when that seed begins to grow in your life, it becomes the greatest of all plants. It’s a beautiful tree where birds can build their nests.”

“Finding God’s purpose for your life is like discovering a treasure hidden in a field. You didn’t know it was there. You were doing your work in a faithful way and kind of stumbled upon it. The important thing is, once you discovered it, you recognized its value, and from that time on, your life had a new sense of direction and joy.” You’ve known people like that. They go about their business day by day, doing the best they know how, and in the process, discover God’s purpose for their lives.

In the case of the merchant in search of fine pearls, he was on an active and continuing search for God's purpose in his life, and one day, when he found it — when he recognized it for what it was — then he did all he could to fulfill that purpose.

In all three parables, which are metaphors, Jesus is not telling you what you "ought" to do. He is describing what happens when you discover God's purpose for you.

I meet people like this all the time. I knew a surgeon who had a very good and lucrative practice. He told me he found his purpose in his everyday work of surgery. In addition, he started years ago to give one month each year to the practice of surgery in various poverty-stricken communities in this country and elsewhere. He told me that was his additional discovery of a treasure hidden in a field.

Each of these three metaphors — the mustard seed, the treasure hidden in a field, and the pearl of great value — describes different ways of finding God's purpose, of becoming aware of the reign of God in your life. People who discover treasure do amazing things. Other people may wonder why they do these things.

People all the time ask me, "How do I find this treasure or the pearl of great price or discover the mustard seed?" My response is that no one else can tell you specifically what your purpose in life might be or how you might discover it. I can tell you only in broad general terms. God's overall general purpose for each one of you is that you will glorify God and enjoy God forever. Or, as I said in a sermon several months ago, God's will for you, God's purpose for you is that you will come to know that (1) life is good; (2) be happy now; (3) let it go.

Finding your specific purpose within this context is something only you can ultimately do, although others can be of help.

Like the mustard seed that is planted in a field, sometimes you will discover God's purpose for you in the middle of your everyday life and work, but you don't recognize it until the seed has grown into a tree — but it's been there all along.

I recall a man who was approaching his retirement, and he said to me, "I've not done very much with my life. When I was young, I honestly thought I would one day be the governor of my home state. I've not even come close. It's terrible to discover how ordinary my life has been."

Yet this man had raised a family, was a loving father and grandfather, had been a productive member of an honorable profession, achieved leadership in his community and church, enjoyed many friends, and all in all had contributed more to the world than he had taken from it. The mustard seed had been planted and had grown into a mature tree, but he had not recognized it for what it was. He had been fulfilling God's purpose for his life more than he had ever yet realized. 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 certainly loved us. She was a good mother, a delightful grandmother, a good homemaker, and a devoted wife." I smiled and suggested, "That sounds like a very good epitaph." In terms of the parable of the treasure hidden in the field, I believe she found it.

There are so many times in your life when the priceless pearl of God's purpose is right there before you, and you do not recognize it for what it is because you have been 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 moment 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."

The further truth is this, according to these three metaphors of the mustard seed, the hidden treasure, and the pearl of great price: You will discover God's purpose for your life as you go about serving others. It is when you are connected to others in acts of love that you are most connected to God — a simple truth we often forget. You will find your deepest purpose in your life as you work with others to make this world better.

A wise person once said to his friend, "Whenever I see you, you're always in such 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 person then said, "That's a good answer if you assume that all those blessings are somewhere ahead of you, trying to elude you, so that 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?" Amen.