

Finding a Purpose for Our Lives

Prayer: *We are warmed by your sun, encircled by your love, blessed by your presence, and sustained by your Spirit. You gather us into this church family and give us a song in our hearts, laughter on our lips and kindness on our touch. Help us to hear your word and to be challenged by your mission in this community. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.*

Today is a wonderful day in the life of the Christian Church ... we call it World Communion Sunday and I would like to begin with a good story.

Several decades ago Robert Redford made his movie *The Natural*, the saga of a young and gifted pitcher who fails to end up in the big leagues because of a one-night stand turned tragic. Gone with a single bullet are his chances for glory, and gone are his ties to his small farm town life and sweetheart. Years later in his forties, he is given the chance for a place on the last place team, Roy Hobbs, as the title character is called, sees his dreams slip away again as his past life comes back to haunt him.

Lying in a hospital bed that has become his bed of bitterness and hopelessness, Roy is faced by Iris, the woman, who has, without his knowledge, raised as a single mother Roy's now teenage son. As Roy laments that his dreams have turned to dust, Iris speaks one line of dramatic irony: "There is the life we live, and then there is the life we live after the life we live." Roy goes on to baseball immortality hitting the winning homerun, a changed and revitalized man.

Centuries before on the road to Damascus, one Saul of Tarsus was leading the "life he lived" when God-sent bolt delivered him to the ground. Then came "the life...after the life he lived." In both cases the protagonist discovers two key lessons: change happens and for real change to take effect it needs to continue to happen.

For all of us as we are nearing the end of life, there are still possibilities for living "the life we live, and then the life we live after the life we live." Today we are exploring Paul's instructions to the new Christians in Philippi: "*I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*" (Phil. 3:14)

In a few moments we celebrate the Lord's Supper with thousands of Christians around the world. At Faith Presbyterian we have been through a spell these last few months when so many of our members have died. There is sadness in their completion of their life's pilgrimage. Now, Elva Reitz has died leaving Louis without his dear companion for these past 78 years.

Experiences have a way of getting our attention and bringing us back to the reality of living. As your pastor I have been forever changed by the experiences of seeing members of this church family die. In 1999 I experienced the deaths of both my father and my mother, just eighteen days apart. All of us have been through experiences of death.

Roger Lovette quotes a playwright friend: "I have come to fondle the days and experiences of life as if they were precious stones." (see *Journey Toward Joy*, by Roger Lovette, p. 68)

Today's reading induces us into the theme of the resurrection. It begins with this interesting statement: *"If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more."* The members of the Philippian Church have been threatened by the religious leaders of their city. They were probably the Judaizers from Rome and they questioned Paul's credentials as a leader of the faith. In turn, Paul makes a case suggesting that his experience as a "good disciple" is beyond reproach or question. *"Having confidence in the flesh"* refers to the human efforts to achieve in life. If there were others trying to preach the proper message in Philippi they would be impressed by all that he had done.

All of this is now meaningless to Paul and this questioning of his "credentials" represents a former time. Now there is the desire to know and serve Jesus Christ alone. He is testifying as to how his new faith has become important. Paul is saying that Jesus Christ means everything in his life. Listen again to his words: *"I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him."* (Phil. 3:8-9)

Paul concludes this section by pointing to the resurrection as the final hope for his life ... and the hope for the lives of all believers. He truly believes that in the sufferings and afflictions of Jesus Christ, he has been enabled to understand his own pains. In turn, his suffering equips him to explain Christ's sacrifice on behalf of all humanity.

His goal is like that of the athlete running for the prize, only this time the prize is to be with Jesus Christ in the resurrection. His language is vivid and filled with action verbs: pressing, stretching, pushing, straining ... all in the imagery of the athlete. We can feel the lungs burning, temples pounding, muscles aching, heart pumping, and perspiration rolling down his face ... all for being in and with Jesus Christ.

This is not an easy path, but it is the reward that makes it all worth it. He is pushing toward a growth in believers that will move them into a new way of life with purpose. Paul is saying, "We have come this far in our faith journeys, so, don't turn back or abandon all that we have begun ... "Keep on keeping on." *"I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."* (Phil. 3:14)

Our pursuit of faith in Jesus Christ . . . is what it is all about! ***Finding a Purpose for Our Lives.***

What we have is a simplified answer to life's purpose. Paul has given us the vision, with the strongest language possible, encouraged the pursuit of Christ's vision for life. Most of us have heard the Christian story over and over again.

We have an idea in our heads as to what that vision is all about. We know the gospel and how it is meant to impact on our lives. But that vision needs a constant renewal in our spirits. If we are still operating on the vision of our faith that popped into our heads at age ten, then it is time for a change. That vision defines the purpose of the Church as well as ***Finding a Purpose for Our Lives.***

Several years ago at the Special Olympics, there were nine contestants for the 100 yard dash, all physically or mentally disabled. At the crack of the gun they started out running, but one boy stumbled on the asphalt track and began to cry. The other eight runners heard the boy cry and they paused, turned around, and went back to where the boy had stumbled. One girl with Down's syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, "This will make it better." Then all nine

linked arms and walked together to the finish line. Everyone in the stadium stood and cheered for ten minutes.

Deep down in our hearts we know that there is ***A Purpose for Our Lives*** ... and what matters is being with others in their needs through Jesus Christ. Yet all of this is not just some intellectual decision. It is the goal for our living, the prize. It is the vision that guides and directs our living. It is the higher calling of our faith in Christ Jesus.

Finding a Purpose for Our Lives . . . my life and your lives.

As Paul has worded it: *“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”*

Scripture: Philippians 3:4-14; Matthew 21:33-46