

## Somebody Has to Go First!

James 1:17-27

Who are you? What is your purpose? Are you a victim of life? How would you answer these questions? Someone asked them of me as part of my *Ask Jack* summer sermon series. Actually, the form in which they were asked was more personal. Who am I? What is my purpose? Am I a victim of life? For the purposes of this sermon, I propose the questions in this way: who are we; what is our purpose; are we victims of life?

There is a familiar story about a little girl, about three or four years old, who was an only child. When she found out that her mother was pregnant, she became very excited about her new brother or sister. Shortly after her parents brought the new baby home, the girl made a request. She wanted to be alone with her new brother in his room with the door closed. This made her parents a little uneasy until they remembered that they had installed a state-of-the-art intercom system in the nursery. If anything strange or dangerous were to happen, they could be in the baby's room in an instant. So they let the little girl go into the baby's room and shut the door. Then they raced to the intercom listening station where they heard their daughter's footsteps moving across the baby's room. They imagined her standing over the baby's crib and heard her say to her three-day-old brother, "Quick, tell me about God. I've almost forgotten." (Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, 113-4)

What can we remember that will help us answer these questions? "Who are we? What is our purpose? Are we victims of life?" Theologian Paul Tillich told us that we are made for eternity and destined for eternity, but we now live cut off from eternity in a dimension of time and space. We can remember about God through study and knowledge. We can remember through our own creative and artistic expression. We can remember through personal relationships of a deep and intimate kind. Author Neal Donald Walsh calls this DNA: divine natural awareness. (*At Home with God in a Life that Never Ends*, 5)

Who are we? As we seek to discern the meaning of our existence, it is not just an intellectual process. We need to trust the credibility of our feelings, perceptions, and imaginations when it comes to the meaning of who we are. Though we tend to see our identity in terms of our jobs, relationships, accomplishments, and ideals, our identity as people is tied up with who God is: the first fruits of God's creatures.

How we are able to deal with the reality that we will die someday holds the key to embracing who we are and what our purpose is – also how to live that purpose powerfully. When death is the enemy – the greatest evil – we tend to live controlled by our fear and by circumstances outside ourselves. When death is seen as a portal to eternity, to the spiritual realm – death as transition, not tragedy – we can begin to live into our own identity and purpose in very powerful ways. But it is difficult for us to embrace death as a blessing – as that transition to God's own presence. Even though we're in touch with that reality now, we only touch it in part, and probably not emotionally -- only intellectually.

What was the meaning of Jesus' life? He was the first fruits of all humanity in its new creation. (1 Corinthians 15) His capacity to live into the unfolding of his life and relationships with God and with the disciples was the key to his new creation. This new creation was represented by his resurrection and, therefore, to the new creation of all humanity – our resurrection. And now, we are the first fruits of all life:

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” (James 1: 17-18)

Our capacity to live into the unfolding of the universe is key to all of creation finding its new birth, finding the culmination of God’s new creation – “new heaven and new earth”

What is our purpose? Discerning the purpose of our existence, our purpose as people is tied up with what God wants. We’re partners with God in creation -- and more than partners. “Life is a process of growth and growth is the evidence of [God’s] presence and expression.” (Neal Donald Walsh, *At Home with God in a World That Never Ends*, 18) Our purpose is to grow. It is to realize our potential and to express the nature of God that is intrinsic to our existence.

The New Testament letter of James describes a way of living that reflects our identity and purpose in God. “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Anger does not produce God’s righteousness.” Maybe there was lots of anger in James’ church -- anger that moved toward violence of thought, word, and action. “Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness and welcome with meekness the implanted word.” This “implanted word” is not the written word of scripture so much as the living word of Jesus. Matthew Fox called this word God’s “creative action” (*Original Blessing*). Meekness means receptiveness to God’s presence (as in the parable of the sower, soils, and seeds). This word “has the power to save your souls.” Salvation, in this sense, means wholeness (*shalom*), oneness with God, awake to the divine reality of the reign of God rather than in or out of God’s club.

“But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” Empty religion deceives itself. Be doers of Jesus, doers of God’s creative energy. Let the mind, spirit, and heart of Christ be in you. Following Jesus means living on the same pathway as Jesus. Empty religion is “like those who look at themselves in a mirror. For they look at themselves (like in worship when we experience a feeling of excitement and glimpse the reality of God), then “on going away (into their lives) immediately forget what they were like.”

But those who *do the word*, “being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. ...Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (James 1: 19-27)

Are we victims of life? Well, was Jesus a victim of life? Our stories of him indicate that he chose the path of his death. Jesus’ death was an act of power, not of victimization. Things happen to us, but we have power in the midst of whatever happens – power to choose and power to find meaning, power to learn and to grow. It is easy, and probably very human, to feel victimized in and by life. It is easy, and perhaps natural, to feel powerless and in a deficit mode. It is easy, and very tempting, to grasp for what is ours in a misguided effort for survival, for justice, and for self-fulfillment.

This way of living is misguided because it fails to recognize that all we have of any real value is our lives: our capacity to think and feel, to will and act, and to relate. Possessions can serve our physical life, but the cost of gaining and keeping possessions can be destructive to us as spiritual beings. It is easy to forget who we are and why we are here, but we can remember.

The last question to ask, then, is this: "what is the purpose, the function, of the church?" What is the purpose of a local congregation like Crossroads in terms of discerning identity and meaning, fulfilling purpose, and living with powerful intentionality? This, too, is pretty simple. Church is a place where you can:

- hear about all this stuff
- encounter God experientially, with our feelings, and intellectually so that we can recognize God's presence when we encounter it again outside the church building.
- practice being in that presence.

Church can be a place to seek, solicit, and find:

- support and guidance for our own journeys
- intrinsic relationships with others -- relationships that move more deeply toward intimacy and agape
- cooperative effort to accomplish challenging tasks
- a gift to share with our loved ones
- a gift to share with strangers
- a place to practice generosity and
- a vehicle to learn stewardship

Coincidentally, a great illustration of what church can be, and of what Crossroads Church strives to be, can be seen in our recent Girls-to-Women retreat. Church is a place to be in relationship inter-generationally: for young people to learn what it means to grow up and become mature persons of faith and for adults to learn what it means to be childlike, playful, and daring. Church is a place and time to heal old wounds and to find new dreams. Church is not the only place or time, not the only way, to achieve and discern and remember. But when church lives up to its potential, it is the best way I can imagine.

There are only two ways for this church to live up to its potential. First, each of us needs to make Crossroads be church according to the vision we have. This requires you and me to be committed, present, involved, and be engaged in worship, Sunday School, ministry and in the community of Crossroads Church. Second, and even more important, be committed, involved, and engaged in your own life journey. Discover and live the dream, the potential, God has placed within you. It is the best thing for you and for this congregation, and will have a positive impact on the world we see and the world we're building. When each of us begins to learn and live our potential as the first fruits of God's new creation, we can change our small piece of the world. We can change the entire world in partnership with God, in the power of the Spirit, and in the presence of Jesus. We must be about doing this work and begin (or begin again) today. It is our identity. It is the meaning of our lives. It is the purpose for our living.