

What Brings You to Life? Galatians 5:1

The summer worship practice at Crossroads Church for the past few years has been the *Ask Jack* sermon series. *Ask Jack* can be a dangerous title, especially if you tend to exchange words, one that's fun to say. It is the recognition that teaching is a community effort, with full participation of the congregation being a goal. Defining questions is an essential part of teaching. During the summer, the voice of the congregation is even more part of this teaching than they are the rest of the year. Their questions reflect their stories in significant ways. Any sermon engages scripture and tradition in their complexity with our own stories and the presence of the Spirit in our lives and in the faith community. This summer's *Ask Jack* series begins today.

When it comes to the value of questions, I continue to be inspired by the advice of poet Rainer Maria Rilke: (from *Letters to a Young Poet*)

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign language. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the question now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

The question for today is: What do I need to build a life worth living? This is a great question first because it recognizes that I'm the one who needs to do it. Second, the question recognizes that it's a building process, not something that just happens or comes into being right away. It is rather like that image from the end of Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* in Matthew's Gospel. After all the powerful and radical teaching concludes, there is a brief story-like analogy.

²⁴“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!” (Matthew 7: 24-27)

Third, the question assumes that the object is “a life worth living.” That's really important because the Gospel is all about following Jesus to build a life worth living, a journey that requires commitment and effort – a journey that is worth the effort! The only change I would make is that the question needs to include “how WE can build a life worth living at Crossroads Church?”

To build a *life worth living*, you need some resources. Francis Dewar has been a spiritual guide to me the last ten years through his book *Invitations*. He posed two questions that are central to today's question and vital to each of us:

- “What brings you to life?”
- “What has a deadening effect on you?” (*Invitations*, p. 8)

If these questions really speak to you, then feel free to stop right here and stay with them. If you can answer them well and put your answers into practice, your answers can lead to building a life worth living!

Another resource is this bit of wisdom:

God sends each person into this world
with a special message to deliver
with a special song to sing for others,
with a special act of love to bestow
no one else can speak my message
or sing my song or offer my act of love

They are entrusted only to me. (John Powell, *Through Seasons of the Heart*, Collins, 1988)

Again, feel free to stay with these words if they help you. In your quiet time, consider what is your message, what is your song, and what is your act of love?

I've been hearing voices this week, though perhaps I shouldn't put it quiet that way! They are been voices of freedom—the quality that is essential to building a life worth living. One was the voice of a popular singing group in the 1960's called *Up with People*. They sang a song called "Freedom Isn't Free" (Paul Colwell, 1965). The lyrics included this line: "You've got to pay a price. You've got to sacrifice for your liberty."

Another voice was that of the Apostle Paul in his New Testament letter to the Galatians (Gal. 5:1). It says simply, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." The Apostle Paul wrote to churches in Galatia about "freedom" from having to submit to the laws of Judaism in order to follow Christ. In doing this, he challenged the orthodoxy of his time. He challenged the church and its leaders to risk freedom and embrace its responsibilities. Paul knew from his own experience to choose the life-giving pathway

The third voice I've been hearing this week has been the familiar spiritual from the Civil Rights struggle in the 1960's, "We Shall Overcome"—especially the verse, "Deep in my heart, I do believe that we shall all be free some day." The call to freedom is an inspiring one, yet somehow, we find ourselves making other choices, prompting another voice--

The dream of freedom
Take wing and fly
To boldly go, but we don't go
We cling to familiar land-bound prisons

Freedom inspires with
Heroes who step boldly into a stark sun
But somehow, we choose to retreat
To the shadows

We mean to change
The world, but push comes to shove
And we hold back; fail to break through
And give in to inertia. (©Jack Price, 2010)

Still the call to freedom sounds boldly in our hearts and echoes in our souls because freedom is the way to life that is worth living.

Freedom is relative. Most people wrestle with attitudes, behaviors, or relationships that, in effect, hold them prisoner. Identifying what is liberating/life-giving for us and also what is stifling

or deadening to us is an important start. But then, how can we overcome fears that keep us from living fully and how can we live in a way that is life-giving and liberating? Father Richard Rohr wrote, “Most Americans are not very connected to the rest of the world; we’re not normally connected to anything except next week and practical problem solving.”

Fear holds us back from giving “free and open assent to the destiny [God’s] love is shaping for us.” (John Main, *The Present Christ*, DLT 1985)

Mystic John Main wrote, “So much of our life is dominated by the mechanical, by the response that is expected or demanded of us, by attempts to predict or anticipate growth, ...we cease to respond to life with wonder [and] we begin to understand it merely as a problem, a series of complicated interlocking processes. But our life is whole. And the wholeness is both its mystery and its simplicity.

On our faith journey, freedom is the choice we have to believe what Jesus, in the Gospels, said are the values and priorities of God: loving the divine with all we are and all we have. Freedom is the choice we can make to shape our lives by those values and priorities: loving our neighbor as ourselves. Freedom is the choice we have to challenge the common wisdom of society about what constitutes success and a life worth living. “Sometimes we must cry in the wilderness, even when no one is listening, even when it is not changing people, just to keep *the common untruth* from changing us.” (Richard Rohr, *Radical Grace: Daily Meditations*, 264)

Twenty-five years ago, I was a young pastor in a church doing a capital campaign to build a new building. Unlike Crossroads, this congregation had a couple of really wealthy families. One of those families made a pledge well into six figures and paid much of it up front. Obviously, their gift made the campaign very successful and the building program went well. Within a year, that family suffered a significant financial loss. They faced the real possibility of financial ruin, even of losing their home.

The first time they came back to church after their financial lost, I wasn’t sure how they’d respond or how they’d feel about having given all that money to the church building. I was sure they would love to have that money back, but what they said surprised me and has stuck with me. They said, “Thank God we invested that money in this place because we have this place to come.” Their investment was in the community who embraced and supported them in a time of great need. That’s how you build a life worth living.

I think the most important building block for a life worth living is the investment we make in each other and in a community of faith. The very best way I know to build those relationships is by talking with each other, having one to one conversations. Share your hopes and dreams, your fears and ambivalence, your frustrations and your grief with people you know and with those you want to know better. Share your story and listen to theirs, especially people you don’t know very well yet. Do this and you’ll build community. Do this and you’ll discover who you are and begin to learn what it is you really want. That’s what you need to begin to build a life worth living.

Do you know what it is that “brings you to life?” Then start doing it, or continue doing it, as much as possible! As for what has “a deadening effect on you,” stop doing it as soon as possible! Accept your own fear and learn to trust that much of it is your creation, a way of dealing with life. And dig into what brings you life. Do it as much as possible. As you grow, you’ll find your fears recede in your life – and eventually, maybe, you’ll hardly notice most of them. Embrace the

freedom to be and to risk and to choose. Live your life! Say yes to that freedom and to the Spirit who gives it!