

“What is the Purpose” (during COVID-19)

October 25, 2020

Deuteronomy 6:1-9 The Shema

Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,

and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Matthew 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’

This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

One fallout of being stuck at home - during a catastrophic pandemic – for better or worse – it gives us a lot of time to ponder life, which in turn seems to lead us to ask serious questions about happiness. In particular: How do I get there?

For more than 2.2 million people – the question has brought them to Yale professor Laurie Santos, the queen of an increasingly crowded discipline known as “happiness studies.”

The class is online and since April 1, more than half a million people are enrolled in Santos’ online class: The Science of Well-Being.

By the way, Harvard, Stanford, McGill in Canada and University of Miami, Northwestern, University of Vermont, Dartmouth, MIT even the University of Michigan have similar classes. Must be a message in there.

I remembered this story. Several years ago, I moved my parents into a retirement community. My brother and I had the emotional and huge task to pack and empty their home where they had lived close to 40 years.

If you have done that kind of thing, you know what I am talking about. My dear mother saves everything. Their garage and attic were full with the accumulation of their lives: old furniture, 2 lawn mowers one that had not worked in years, an extra freezer that did not work, dolls and barbies, every size of Tupperware known to humanity, even hospital equipment like plastic urinals and tubs. She must have had 25 pairs of scissors used to cut bandages. She is a retired nurse. Lamps and pictures and souvenirs.

And I think the most painful part of the move was all the Christmas ornaments. They had some from my father’s childhood to my children’s handprints.

My mother was exhausted and tearful and sat in the middle of it all. One of my children innocently asked an important question: Grandmother, why do you have all this stuff?

My mother said something like: “Because I wanted to live – because I wanted my life to amount to something.” It is the most basic human longing. “Why did you buy all this stuff?”

“Because I wanted to live . . . wanted my life to amount to something.”
(*Michael Lindvall, The Christian Life: A Geography of God*)

What is the meaning of your life? Is it really defined by the accumulated stuff in our basements, attics, closets?

It is the question, or don’t you think?

What’s it all mean? What’s it all about? Is it merely our individual junk collection?

A pastor friend of mine tells a story about a bright senior high student –

in his youth group. It was in the 60s, and every youth curriculum in that volatile and difficult era was focusing on the topic of life's purpose and living with integrity.

One evening, after yet another uninspiring session, she said, "Pastor Steve, if we have one more discussion about the meaning of life, I'm afraid I'm gonna throw up. Can't we do something about it instead of sitting around eating pizza and talking about it?"

She had a point, and it's in the Bible. Life's meaning and purpose is, finally, a product of our behavior, not our ideas, or better said, it is about our behavior growing out of ideas - that are good and true. (*John Buchanan*)

There has been a lot of research in psychology, economics, and neuroscience – probably because of the chaos around us – that has started to examine the factors that help personal well-being and happiness.

One surprising, but consistent, observation has been that many of the things that are widely believed to be – crucial for our happiness – wealth, material possessions, "not missing out", even good grades – not only fail to make us happy but can actually – undermine our sense of well-being. That's interesting.

It is the question we all ask, maybe every single day of our lives, right up to the end. "To whom or what do I give my ultimate loyalty, my deepest love, my full and total service. – what can I find and use to make a life and not just a living?" - *Michael Lindell*

A Pharisee, a religious official, a kind of lawyer whose job it is to teach and interpret the religious law, came to Jesus and posed the same question essentially:

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest? What should we do to be good?"

Religion has always focused on the good, the good life, and religion has always tried to define and prescribe it in terms of rules—mainly what not to do in order to be good.

There were, in fact, 613 separate commandments, or rules, that constituted the law, the Torah. They covered all of life: what to eat, to wear, when to work and rest, how to raise children, how to farm, how to weave, slaughter animals, how to cook.

There were so many - you could never be sure you weren't doing something wrong and violating some rule. It was so complicated –

that some people devoted their entire lives to exploring, struggling, discussing, interpreting the law. They were the Pharisees.

And one of the questions they asked a lot was “Say you had to boil it all down to one overarching commandment, or concept, what would it be? Which is the greatest commandment?”

They knew the answer. Devout Jews, for thousands of years, have memorized it, recited it, wore around their wrists, around their forehead, nailing to their doorposts: *“Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”*

There you have it - that’s what you should do. “Love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength.”

The Pharisees all nodded in agreement.

Jesus did not even pause – “There’s a second,” he said, “It’s like the first one. In a way it is what the first one means in practical terms: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Jesus turned their religion upside-down; when he combined God and neighbor.

And our challenge – is to keep them both in tension. Love of God without love of neighbor becomes a kind of selfish spirituality – not relevant to the world – not even very interesting.

Leave out the neighbor and religion – it becomes a way of being self-righteous, exclusive.

Great thinkers (and celebrities) have given the question thought – Aristotle, is believed to have written that the essence of life is “to serve others and to do good”.

And His Holiness the Dalai Lama added, “if you can't help them, at least don't hurt them.” And actress Whoopi Goldberg’s meaning-of-life metaphor is to “throw little torches out to lead people through the dark.” I like her image.

Michael Lindvall, writes that while our natural state is always to think of ourselves first, a radical self-orientation. To be a person of faith is to reorient our focus “ redirect it “ consciously and intentionally, from self to God and to neighbor, God – neighbor.

Your neighbor, Jesus said, is the one who needs you. And that can be your literal next-door neighbor who is lonely or the person on the next street. It can be your family member, your child, mother, or father, who needs you

in a new, distressing ways especially these days. It can be your spouse or lover or friend.

We have no lack of neighbors to love, no lack of opportunity to do what is good, and in the process, we know the blessing of the good life defined by Jesus.

Buchanan suggest; “It is like a second conversion, an intentional turning, first to God and then to our neighbor.”

And you know – as we do that – “turn to our neighbor who needs us”, we begin to see our deepest needs, our deepest yearning, our deepest purpose.

And this love in the way of Jesus – circles back and blesses the giver. We are created for this. We are, someone said, wired for love.

Jesus calls us to a life purpose that is not just about us – but bigger by the love of God; a life of love for neighbor; a life whose purpose and meaning are found in that love; a life, at the end of the day, that is good and full and joyful.

I asked at the beginning of the sermon. So how do we get there?

Tal Ben-Shar, who started an entire academy to figure out the question about purpose and happiness, says: “Attaining lasting happiness requires that we enjoy the journey on our way toward a destination we deem valuable. Happiness, therefore, is not about making it to the peak of the mountain, nor is it about climbing aimlessly around the mountain: happiness is the experience of climbing toward the peak”. What is our purpose? It is found in the journey.

“What is the greatest commandment of all?” they asked, and he answered: “You shall love God with all your heart, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Amen.

(Credit to John Buchanan who added much to this sermon)