

***"The Church of the Future:
The Challenge of Meaninglessness"***

***Luke 12:13-21
October 18, 2009***

***John 4:1-14
St. James UCC***

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Most of us are busy people, who live very busy lives. We rush from one place to the next, from one responsibility to the next, hoping that by the end of the day we will have accomplished everything that we're supposed to, or at least all of the things that we consider to be the most important or the most urgent things we need to accomplish. But, what does it all mean? What is life really about? What is your life or my life really all about?

Those are difficult questions, and in part I suspect that we like to avoid them because we don't have easy answers, we don't have answers that readily and fully respond to these questions. We're so busy and preoccupied that often we achieve a sort of numbness in which we don't think too hard about questions like these. This is a numbness that comes from being overloaded and overwhelmed, a numbness that comes from being so bombarded with opportunities and concerns that at times we wonder what we can do that really makes a difference anyway.

We see symptoms of this challenge in our young people - the pressures that they face, the ways that they feel overwhelmed as they try to make sense of life and of all of the expectations that surround them. Some respond by actually gaining a sense of purpose, while others turn to alcohol or drugs as a form of escape - challenging others with questions like, what's the difference? Or it's my life, what's it to you? In some ways, it seems like many youth try to make sense out of life by being different. It gives them an identity, and it almost seems as if they're checking to see if they can find meaning in life by shocking others, by standing out - a sort of, maybe if I'm outrageous enough it will define who I really am.

But, it's not only our youth. In recent decades our society has been focused on the now. Give me what I want and give it to me now. That's been true on an individual level where most people regularly spend money they don't have for things they want but don't really need, and it's been true on a national level, where for many years we have run up enormous deficits as a country to pay for what we wanted now, while ignoring the fact that it is our children who will pay for these things if we don't.

You know, we used to have more of a vision of building a better world. I was a child, but I still remember John F. Kennedy's inaugural address when he said, "Ask not what

your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." He expressed a value that many people shared, namely that they wanted to build a better world for their children than they had found for themselves. They wanted life to be better for the next generation than it had been for them. But we've lost much of that vision, we've lost much of that value, and instead we've been living as if there is no tomorrow, as if there is no real meaning or purpose to our lives, as if we're lost and confused.

We've been living much like the rich fool that Jesus describes in our text from Luke. We've built bigger barns, decided that we are going to have all the good things we want, and we've failed to stop and ask what is the meaning and the purpose of our lives?

We know that in the case of the rich fool he only considered his physical needs and desires. When he looked for meaning and purpose in his life, he only looked at his wealth, and that turned out to be empty indeed when he died, for as Jesus said, "This is how it is with those who pile up riches for themselves but are not rich in God's sight."

Jesus told this parable in response to a question from a man in the crowd who apparently was the younger of the two sons, and was seeking Jesus' help in forcing his brother to divide the inheritance with him. Jesus refused to judge between them, and noted that that kind of covetousness is a real threat to the man's life, saying, "Watch out and guard yourselves from every kind of greed because a person's true life is not made up of the things he owns, no matter how rich he may be."

Those are words that we need to hear as well! Our true lives are not made up of the things that we own. Meaning and purpose cannot come from our possessions, and the covetousness that our society has shown in recent decades is a real threat, because we have been principally concerned with material wealth, with what we can accumulate in this life, rather than being rich in God's sight.

That's the same kind of message that Jesus delivers to the woman at the well. There she was, a Samaritan woman, who had made a mess of her life. She had been married five times, and now she was living with another man. Jesus talks with her about the life-giving water given to us by God, versus the water that the well offers. She had come seeking water from the well, and Jesus tells her that the water that He can offer her is far more precious, for it is the water of eternal life.

How true it is, that when our focus is on the riches of this world, we never have enough. You can be the wealthiest person in the world, and still not be happy or satisfied. For this kind of riches has nothing to offer that is really lasting. Money can only satisfy the need or the desire of the moment, and then we want more, we're thirsty again. But as Jesus says, "The water that I will give him will become in him a spring which will provide him with life-giving water and give him eternal life."

If we are looking for meaning and purpose that lasts for more than a few hours, then we must look to the life-giving water that Jesus offers to us.

Robert Browning said the same thing when he spoke of Christ as "the C-major of this life." The first lesson at a piano is to learn where to find middle C - or C major. That is the reference point from which everything else proceeds. When Christ is our point of reference, everything else will come into the proper alignment and harmony.

That is at the heart of the challenge of meaninglessness that we face today. There is so much that we're involved in and concerned about, that we can spend all of our time doing and seeking, without ever really stopping to ask, what is the purpose of all this? Where is the center of our lives, the center that gives everything else meaning and purpose? There are a whole lot of people looking for that meaning. Many of them in frustration have turned away from churches. They're trying this and that, and often never find what they're really looking for.

You know when we step back and take a good long look at our lives, we see that by themselves, many of the things that we do each day are empty and meaningless. We do a lot of tasks that need to be done, but they aren't really why we're here and what we're here for. It is only when we place them in the context of our relationship with God, that they take on a meaning and purpose that is lasting. If we go through life and our only purpose is to build up enough wealth to take care of ourselves and our family, then we will be like the rich fool - focusing on the treasures of this world, and failing to build up treasure with God. It is only when Christ becomes the middle C - the point of reference - for our lives that we find a meaning and purpose that is lasting, that is the life-giving water that Jesus describes.

I am deeply concerned and deeply afraid for our society. We have focused far too much on the pleasures of today and far too little on our relationship with God. We have been using and abusing resources, mostly concerned with what they will do for us today, and saddling the generations to come with enormous burdens. We have drifted and lost a sense of meaning and purpose, so that what we have substituted is an attitude of "me first". One of the great challenges that this church and the church as a whole faces is how do we challenge this pattern of meaninglessness? How do we do a better job of helping people to find the answers that they are so desperately seeking?

In the sermon feedback two weeks ago, one person commented that she wasn't surprised that the focus that Sunday was on music, and that she expected the next topic to focus on Christian Education. When I think about it, I guess that is the focus today, but it's not limited by what happens in our Sunday School or what is planned by our Board of Christian Education. The issue really is about all that we do as a church. How do we communicate clearly the importance of placing God at the center of our lives.

We need to point to the meaning and purpose that only comes to our lives when we live as God's people. We need to lift up for individuals and for our society that there is another way, a better way, that we are called to live. We need to accept the life-giving water that Jesus offers to us, and then we need to reach out and share it with others.

Amen.