

Sunday, June 26, 2016 at Advent Lutheran Church in Cedarburg, Wisconsin. 6th. Sunday after Pentecost. Luke 9:51-62. It's all about purpose and commitment.

QUESTION: Both Jesus and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., talk about the power of having a purpose in life. You may even say that without a purpose you would not be able to live! Can someone tell the rest of us here this morning what you think is the purpose of your life? Do you have a purpose? And to Dr. King's point, what would you be willing to die for if anything?

In our Gospel lesson for today we are told that Jesus, **has set his face to Jerusalem**, which I believe underscores two things; **one**, he is Jewish and Jerusalem is the capital of the Jewish state even though occupied by Rome, and **two**, the Samaritans who are the ancestors of the modern day **Palestinians**, or Arabs as we call them. In a word, **"enemies."**

The disciples in their anger want to attack the **Samaritans** and consume them with fire! In other words; **Go to war with them**. Jesus says **"no,"** and I interpret that to mean that **the purpose of war is not to create more war, but to end the need for war altogether!**

So they just go on to another village. Someone approaches and promises to follow Jesus wherever he goes. This man too must be a **foreigner** as they are in Samaritan that is **enemy** territory. Jesus tells him that even foxes and birds have homes in which they live but he has nowhere to lay his head.

I take this to mean that his **purpose** is **not** to establish a **"home,"** that is a **tribe**, a **national identity**, but rather to be tied to no particular culture or national power. I'm reminded of our often heard cry from the fundamentalist Christian right that we should be a Christian nation!

No. Jesus is **not** interested in nation building but rather **freeing us** from **national identity**.

Yet another man wants to follow Jesus and he says he needs to bury his father first. A literal reading of this text makes it sound like it makes no sense, or worse yet, that Jesus is deliberately being outright **offensive**. Who wouldn't want to bury their own father?

But seen in the historical and cultural context of the day and the **Orthodox Jewish** religion an entirely different meaning is possible. In the culture and religion of the time it would have been **unthinkable** to not fulfill the sacred duty of burying one's deceased family member and in particular one's **father**. That said I think we need to find the meaning of the passage someplace else.

I would suggest that the message here is not so much about offending anyone really, but making the point that his **purpose** is not to fulfil religious responsibilities and obligations but the opposite – to **free** us from them by proclaiming the **kingdom of God** which is all about **freedom!**

If anything, freedom from religion!

And the last man wants to go back home to say farewell to those at his home. That **comfortable** place, that **predictable** place, that **safe** place. That place that is familiar and a symbol of not having to **change** anything.

I believe the message here is ironically illustrated by a modern day phrase often mentioned humorously in talking about religious or church communities summarized in what are called the **last seven words of a dying church:**

“We’ve never done it that way before!”

Once again using a farming analogy that the people of his day would certainly understand;

“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

If you are plowing the earth looking **backwards**, you can be pretty sure something really bad is going to happen. The **purpose** of plowing is to prepare the land for planting. The **purpose** of Jesus' message and mission is to bring **hope**, and **healing**, and **peace**, and above all else **purpose** and **meaning** to your life!

And all of these are universal properties that all human beings regardless of our differences long for and need for life to have meaning and fulfillment. That is certainly why Jesus spends most of his time and energy breaking down barriers between people, **religions** and **cultures** rather than building walls which is something we are so very eager to do among ourselves.

Walls of racial segregation, economic inequality, gender, age and other artificial constructs that we build out of fear and uncertainty. And chief among the things that needlessly divide is religion itself. **All religions really.**

I have often thought of all religions being just like languages. **All languages** are different. All languages are used for communication, for sharing ideas, joys, sorrows, support and responsibility.

So are **religions.**

All languages seek to define reality, what is important, what works and does not work. What is good for us and what is not so good. And when common words fail us in any language we use **poetry, music** and the **visual arts** to communicate the deeper feelings of being human.

All religions too seek to describe or define reality, spiritual reality that is not confined to mere words and doctrines. **Worship** is like **poetry** and **art** in language. And just like all of the arts worship speaks to the deeper person within each one of us in ways that mere words cannot.

I believe that too is the message of Jesus, be careful that the **vehicle, the means, the language** of seeking God, of **describing** your encounter with the **sacred** does not replace that which you are trying to communicate. That's a trap that all religions fall into to some degree, and at the extreme they become terrorist cells like the **Islamist terrorists** that are so much in the news today.

And here too we must be careful, as a dear friend of mine and author reminded me recently the term "**Islamic terrorist,**" is incorrect, for **Islamic** denotes a **religion** and includes over **1.5 billion** people in the world. They are not all terrorists.

"**Islamist**" means that that certain people within that community that also speak that language have **perverted** and **twisted** it in to an **ideology** that is not by any means the **religion** that it springs out of.

Western intellectuals are on very dangerous ground when they confuse the two. And the uninformed general public out of **anger** and **frustration** fuel the fires of **fear** and **hysteria** only making matters worse.

At the beginning of this service I asked you what your **purpose** in life is because everyone has a **purpose**. And at this stage of my life, faith and research in the Christian tradition I have come to believe that the **purpose of Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection** is to bring healing, wholeness and peace to humanity.

Not to create yet another competing **religion** among many that would end up being **one more tribe** among **many tribes** mostly in **conflict** with one another because of our human penchant for needing to believe that we and only we know and have the truth, but to bring an end to those competing instincts.

I believe this because every single pronouncement of Jesus is **universal** in nature, which is why I continue to see the hand of God in **all of life**. It is impossible to separate life into **sacred** and **secular** as religions do when God is life itself and there is no place or time that is or can be separate from God.

And I believe our purpose, for every one of us who believes in Jesus and God is to live our lives trying to do whatever we can to bring that about.

AMEN.