

Finding Your Purpose and Your Joy

June 1, 2014

Acts 1:1-6

My good friend Brady Faggart, long-time pastor of First Lutheran Church here in Greensboro, now retired, had a saying that he liked to use when talking with people about their plans, their goals, their pursuits: “Listen to the voice of your own joy.”

I don’t know that it was original with Brady, but it’s pretty good advice, I believe, if we understand it properly.

In our country, and really all over the world, sports are a big thing. People like to be on teams – baseball teams, basketball teams.

Or, if we’re past our playing days, most of us have a team or two that we root for on a regular basis.

I’m sure it’s no secret to most of you that I love my Tar Heels, even though Jean and Merrilou and some others tell me I am terribly misguided. Well, to each his own, I guess.

And if you’re on a team that’s winning, or if the one you root for is doing well, it’s even better.

As your team heads for the championship, and you’re a part of it, you feel a sense of purpose – there’s a goal you’re striving for. And if your team achieves that goal and wins, you feel a sense of joy.

But, there’s a letdown after everything is over. The celebrating is over, the season is over, and that’s it. That sense of purpose and joy you had before – it’s gone.

Now you’re going to have to find something else to do, something else that gives you a sense of purpose and joy.

That’s true not just in sports, but in just about everything we do in this world. We all want to have a sense of purpose in our lives.

And we all want to have something that gives us joy. Sports can provide that, but only for a little while.

Some people like to dive into home improvement projects, and that works too, but only for a while.

Hobbies are good, but the purpose and the joy they bring to us lasts only a little while too.

Today, I want to show you where you can find a sense of purpose in your life, and a sense of joy, that can last a long, long time.

Presbyterians note this day in the Christian year as the 7th Sunday of Easter, and so it is.

But many denominations also refer to today as Ascension Sunday, because on this day we remember how, according to scripture, Jesus spoke one last time to his disciples and then ascended into heaven.

Today we're going to look at Jesus' words, and Jesus' actions, and as we do, we're going to discover something.

We're going to discover that if we really want to have a sense of purpose in our lives, we don't need to look down into this world for that.

Instead, we can look up, at our ascending Lord, and there we will find a permanent sense of purpose.

And if you're looking for joy in your life, you don't need to look down at this world where everything is so temporary. Look up, and you'll find a deeper and longer lasting kind of joy in Christ.

Our gospel readings for the last couple of Sundays have focused on Jesus' last earthly meeting with his disciples as he is preparing them to carry on his mission and ministry after he is no longer with them.

The passage that I read from John today is part of what is known as Jesus' High Priestly Prayer.

He is praying for the disciples, for their strength, courage and protection, and their will to carry on the work entrusted to them.

This prayer is found only in John's gospel and it actually occurs before Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion.

So let's fast-forward a little – all of that has happened, and the resurrection has been accomplished.

Let's jump to about 5 and a half weeks after the resurrection. You can read about this in the 24th chapter of Luke.

We find Jesus and his disciples together on the Mount of Olives, the same general area where he had been arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Not too far away from that mountain was the hill where he was crucified.

Today, the resurrected Jesus gathered his disciples together because he had a few more things he wanted to say to them before his ascension.

And the disciples are still confused about why Jesus had come. They asked him if he was now going to restore Israel to the grandeur it had enjoyed in the past.

Jesus told them not to think about those kinds of things. What he really wanted them to think about was their purpose in life, now that he was about to leave them.

Over the last 3 years, their purpose had been to follow him and to learn from him. Now, they were through following, through learning. Now, Jesus was going to give them a new job, a new purpose for their lives.

Look at what Jesus tells them in Acts, 1:8 that Janet read earlier: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

That’s what Jesus wanted those disciples to do – that was their new purpose in life - to be witnesses to other people.

Their purpose now, was to witness the things they have seen and learned to other people.

As a Christian today, that’s our purpose too.

We observed Holy Week and Easter a few weeks ago. Through scripture, we watched Jesus as he suffered, died, but then rose from the tomb.

Even though we didn’t see those things with our eyes, we heard about them and believed them with our hearts.

And as the Holy Spirit has led us over the years, we have developed a Christian understanding of why Jesus died, and why he rose from the dead.

His sacrifice was for us. His death and resurrection are the reasons we are forgiven of our sin and have the sure hope of eternal life.

Today, if we claim the name of Jesus the Christ, as we do when we declare ourselves Christians – Christ-ians - our purpose is to be a witness of these things to others.

That’s why we’re here, why God has put us here on this planet – to be a witness.

Sometimes, I think we get confused about the purpose of our lives. We do have lots of temporary, earthly purposes – to earn a living, to be a good son or daughter, to be a good mother or father or spouse – those are all good purposes.

To look for ways to help other people, to make this world a better place – those are good purposes too. But there’s something deeper. Something more spiritual that is keeping us here on this planet.

If you want to know what it is, don't look at this world. Look up, at the ascended Christ. Those other purposes are good, and we pray for God's blessing and guidance as we seek to fulfill them.

But our deeper, more spiritual purpose can be found in Jesus' words to his disciples: "You are witnesses of these things."

In other words, our calling as followers of Jesus is to share with others what Christ has done and what Christ means to our lives.

And how do we do that? Some think of "witnessing" as talking, either standing on a street corner shouting or getting in someone's face, having a quiet, one-on-one, or speaking to a group.

Others might see "witnessing" as handing out tracts or pamphlets or other printed materials, singing, writing. There are many things that we do, and no doubt some of them can be effective and helpful.

But I think to get to the real meaning of "witnessing" we need to go directly to the source.

Jesus didn't say that people will know that you are his disciple if you are a dynamic speaker. He didn't say that the mark of discipleship is to have a way with words or song or writing.

Nothing wrong with any of these. But what did Jesus say? He said "THIS is how people will know that you are my disciple-if you have love for one another. And he was talking about that special, agape-kind of love

There's a great hymn that's not in our hymnal, although I wish it were. It's called "Share His Love," and the chorus ends with the words, "show the world that Jesus Christ is real to you, every moment, every day."

Show. Not just tell. Show, in all actions and relationships, that the leadership of Jesus the Christ is not merely a philosophy or lip service, but is truly our way of life.

After talking with his disciples, Jesus performed one last visible miracle for them. He lifted up his hands to bless them, just as we do at the end of the service.

And then, we are told by Luke, the writer of Acts, he ascended into the sky, right before their eyes.

And so what did those disciples do then? No doubt they were amazed and awe-struck at witnessing such a sight. But they didn't just stand around scratching their heads wondering what now? What do we do?

We are told in scripture that they worshipped Christ on that mountain. And then they returned to Jerusalem, filled with a sense of great joy.

They met with each other in the temple courts, praising God for the things they had heard and seen.

Think about that. Before, the disciples would hide in their houses, afraid of the Jewish leaders. Now, we see them out in public, worshiping Jesus, filled with joy. Why the big change?

They had just seen Jesus victoriously ascend to his heavenly throne. There was no doubt in their minds anymore that he was God's anointed, the Messiah.

They had just heard two angels tell them that someday, Jesus would return. They might not have fully understood what that meant, just like we may not fully understand it today.

But that's what filled them with joy. The angry, growling Jewish leaders couldn't keep those disciples from publicly displaying their joy in the temple courts.

I began this morning with the adage, listen to the voice of your own joy. That can be dangerous if we, as so many people do, find our joy only in things – in our money or our possessions or other worldly stuff.

But if you're looking for a sense of joy in your life, a deeper, longer-lasting sense of joy, look where the disciples looked. Look to Jesus.

Sure, there will be times in your life when you are upset. Things will happen that will anger you, sadden you, depress you.

But for a Christian, underneath that anger or sadness, you will find a layer of joy that the world can't take away.

The disciples had it after they saw the risen Jesus ascend. My prayer is that God may give that same kind of joy to you.

And when you have found that joy for yourselves, don't hesitate to let others see it in you. Show the world that Jesus Christ is real to you.