

**Build Us Up**  
July 22, 2012

Ephesians 2:11-22

Let's go back to school for a few minutes this morning. Now that may not be something too many of us would relish, but put yourself into the schoolroom for a moment, and imagine you've been asked to write a little essay on the subject of your life's purpose.

In 200 words or less, finish the statement: "I believe my life's purpose is . . ." What would you say?

If you were anything like me, I'd venture to guess that your essay would have to do with what you suppose you are meant to do in the world.

Perhaps you would talk about your activities, your duties done and done well, your creations, your work. We humans are it seems, by nature, workers. We're raised to it and schooled in it. Or maybe we're born to it.

I remember seeing videos about archeological expeditions that unearthed what were thought to be among the very first human remains. A narrator's voice tells us that the creatures found were our fore bearers.

And how do we know? Here we are shown their artifacts, their tools - a club, a spear, a mallet. These creatures were like us. They saw a job that needed doing and they got it done. They were the prehistoric world's movers and shakers.

Even their artwork - those mysterious cave paintings - seems to have some relationship to the industriousness of these people. They often depicted the hunt.

Our species, from the beginning, has been an industrious one. We enter the world, and by our acts, we change it. We literally are changing the face of the earth each day - sometimes with frightening effect.

We are harvesting oceans. We are removing forests. We are planting deserts. We are, some scientists fear, changing, by our acts, our entire ecosystem. We are industrious, and we leave our mark.

We have our computers and our iPods and our cell phones to structure the myriad of activities and duties that fill our lives. And I think for many people the implication is that: "I am busy" equates to "I am worthy."

Much of history and human experience conspire, it seems, to convince us that the value of our lives is linked to our productivity, or at least to our activity.

I'm reminded of that bumper sticker that you saw a lot a while back: "Jesus is coming – look busy!"

Some folks do seem to equate being constantly in motion with actually doing something useful..

You may remember the humorist Max Kaufman. He wrote, with the editorial help of Dick Enberg and others, a book a few years ago entitled "Humorous Quotes For All Occasions."

One of his stories has to do with how as a parent he had been keeping a watchful eye on his son and what he's spending his time on. Kaufman says, "My son has taken up meditation. At least it's better than sitting around doing nothing."

Developmental psychologists do tell us that the years of an average, healthy, well-adjusted adult are largely devoted to work and production, whether outside the home or within it - whether we work in an office or a factory, whether we work with numbers or with widgets, whether we shape children or mold cheeses or arrange flowers or write sonnets - still we are busy and productive and working.

We are constructing life. This is normal. This is to be expected. This is the way of human life. This is how we understand ourselves and value ourselves.

Yet, as I have had more years to observe things, I've started thinking that this is may be a costly way to engage life - a very costly way. Did you know that Americans now work an average of 160 hours per year more than they did 30 years ago? This pattern of defining life by our work takes its toll inevitably upon us.

Now I realize that many of us here are retired, or semi-retired and perhaps don't work as long and hard as we once did. But we all have family members or friends who themselves or someone in their family fits what we're talking about. So hopefully some of these thoughts can be helpful to others as well as to ourselves.

Maybe it's time for a reorientation about life's purpose. Maybe life is less a challenge to be met and conquered, or a job to be engaged and accomplished, than a book to be read.

In the words of author Mort Adler, : "In the case of good books, the point is not to see how many you can get through, but rather how many can get through to you."

So, let's take a brief gaze back now over our lives so far. And yes, it's okay to admire the notches on your belt for all you've done. But after making that survey, be a little fearless now and take your self-survey a level deeper.

What has life done to you? If life has been a book to be read, what has gotten through to you?

In one of his books, Max Lucado reports that some pranksters broke into a department store of a large city one night, stayed to accomplish their mission, and left without being detected.

Actually, they didn't come to steal anything. They came to have some fun. They spent their time in the store switching all the price tags.

The large ticket items were marked with small ticket prices and vice versa. Everything was confused and disordered. Imagine a can opener marked \$500 and a lawn mower for \$3.50!

The most amazing thing about the prank, however, was the outcome on the following day's business. He reports that it took four hours for anyone to notice. Four hours of nose to the grindstone, blinders on, business as usual. And no one noticed.

Lucado suggests we suffer from the same sort of confusion in our lives. He says, "Our values are messed up. Someone broke into the store and exchanged all the price tags. Thrills are going for top dollar and the value of human beings is at an all time low."

Do you think he's right? What goes for top dollar in our lives? What really counts? Have we let our values be switched and confused? Have we lost track of how valuable various critical aspects of life are?

In fact, have we lost track of how valuable we are - not because of what we make or do or achieve - but just because we're us? Have we let the real truth of our value to God get through to us?

In the letter to the Ephesians we read a most astonishing claim. It is that we are all part of God's house - whether we are productive or not, whether we are of this group or that, whether we are well-known to one another or relative newcomers - we are all members of the household, brought together in our faith.

This house is built upon the cornerstone of Christ. And our place in it is of extraordinary importance, not because of what we have achieved, not because we have earned our place there, but simply because together we are being built into a dwelling place for God. We are the temple of God.

I can't think of anything we could achieve that could match that in importance, no honor more valuable, no reward we could more covet, no purpose for our lives that we could concoct that could mean more to us, than to be built up by God and readied to hold God's Spirit.

Is it hard to imagine that we, messed up, divided, overworked people, sometimes lost and frequently confused about our purpose, could actually be being built, even now, by God, into something that extraordinary?

Is it so hard to imagine? Maybe we're usually just too busy to notice.

If you go to the internet and type in your search engine something like "house construction materials," you will find numerous examples of people who build houses out of the most unusual things.

I read about one man whose main building materials were 2000 tires and 20,000 aluminum cans – that’s what he built his house out of. He covered the tires and cans with an adobe finish, and apparently, that house is still standing today, and still being lived in.

There are even people who build houses out of garbage. Yes, garbage. Look it up.

Sitting on the desk in my study here is a brick from our old sanctuary that burned. I know that many of you have one of those too. That brick is a constant reminder of our former sanctuary, it’s beauty and the many good things that happened there.

But as I was thinking on today’s epistle lesson and this sermon, that brick became the symbol of something else. It reminded me of the most unusual home builder that ever was, someone who has built his house out of something even stranger than cans and tires, and even brick.

And after putting these strange building materials together, this builder is still living in this house to this very day. The person I am talking about is Jesus Christ. He is the master home builder.

He has built for himself a home to live in, and that home is called the Holy Christian Church. And he has chosen the most unusual building material there is to build his house – he has chosen you. You are his building material According to the Bible, you are a brick in the house of God.

Remember the song I quoted last week – the church is not a building or a steeple, the church is people, even though, according to the Bible, we aren’t the best of building materials. First of all, people don’t always fit well together. People clash with each other.

Our epistle lesson mentions that in verse 14 where it says that Christ destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. Here the writer is talking about the hostility that existed between the Jews and the Gentiles at that time.

And it’s still true today. People struggle with pride and selfishness that often keep us from getting along. Why would God want to live in a house built out of people? Remember that God is perfect. God is pure. You would think that our sin would drive God away.

But enter Jesus Christ. Thanks to the atoning sacrifice of Christ, when we accept it we are made righteous in God’s sight. And that’s why he chooses us to be the bricks of his church.

So let me ask you a question this morning. How do you see yourself? Are you someone who goes to church or are you someone who is the church? There is a big difference. Are you a brick in the house of God?

I think everyone who takes their Christian calling seriously needs to ask themselves, “what do people see when they look at me?” Do they see Christ?

I remember reading about someone who attended a worship service in a tiny church in rural Wisconsin. She was there visiting a friend, and the friend wanted to take her to church.

It so happened that on the Sunday they attended, the church had a young visiting pastor preaching. He was a novice and very nervous. So nervous, in fact, that he was nearly buried in his sermon notes.

He didn't notice the polite coughs, and then the little motions and waves from the congregation, trying to tell him that the microphone was malfunctioning and just projecting to them, the congregation, a steady, muffling buzz.

Thank goodness, you all never fail to point out when our sound system is on the fritz. I'm glad you do that.

But this young preacher forged ahead with great enthusiasm for the task, gesturing emphatically and working hard at his delivery. But no one could hear a word he said.

No one had the heart to interrupt him to fix the microphone. The writer commented that they sat through an incredible pantomime.

But, she said, when they lined up to leave and shake his hand, she stood behind an elderly woman of the congregation, and overheard what she said to him. The writer said she will never forget the graciousness of the lady's remarks.

Most of the people there that day had simply found the experience amusing. What that lady had noticed was profound. Something amazing had gotten through to her.

She said, "You know Reverend, we didn't hear a word you said. But, we saw the Word lived. Because your presence with us reminded us of God's presence among us."

Wouldn't that be a wonderful thing to have said about you, about me, about each and every one of us: "Your presence with us reminds us of God's presence among us." I honestly can't think of anything that would be more meaningful than that.

Look around. This is an extraordinary place. Sure, we moan and groan sometimes about problems and about what we don't have, and we need to work on some of those. But I hope you feel, as I do, that when we are here together this place is filled with God's presence, and even yet it's building among us.

And isn't that the most important work we'll ever do? Amid all our "busyness," isn't that the most important possible purpose for our lives? Shouldn't that help us overcome any differences or concerns among us?

My prayer every day, and I hope it's yours too, is, May God continue to build us up.

