

January 3, 2021

We're still in the season of Christmas, next Sunday we'll begin the season of Epiphany. Our reading today is from that wonderful Gospel of John. Symbolized by the eagle, one thing that I love about John is the big picture. John soars...

Have you ever laid on your back on a summer night and looked up at the stars and wondered, "Wow, what is this universe all about?" John looks at the stars and sees Jesus.

This is where the gospel of John starts, "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

In other words, life is the reason for all creation, and Jesus is all about that abundant life...

In seminary, I was deeply influenced by Viktor Frankl. I've talked about him before... His understanding of the Human being, shapes how I think about, as the apostle Paul would say, how I "live, and move and have my being."

Frankl was a holocaust survivor. He saw human atrocities we can't possibly imagine and he came to profound insight about the nature of human beings. Key to his understanding of people, is that all people get out of bed in the morning to experience some kind of meaning or purpose.

He said that without meaning or purpose in our life we curl in on ourselves, we despair, we suffer an “inner hell” of sorts. It can lead to depression, poor self-esteem, thoughts of worthlessness, possibly suicide...

And the opposite also happens, when your life is full of meaning and purpose, instead of struggling, you thrive, you revel in the fact that your life makes a difference in the world. When life is meaningful you are productive and healthy.

Frankl also said that we experience meaning in three ways: through projects or work- accomplishing something, through relationships with one another, and through the attitudes we adopt to the suffering we endure. Notice, all this happens, when we love God and love the neighbor.

Today, I'd like to do a little reflecting on this meaning and purpose stuff, in the midst of living through this pandemic... Many of us have made substantial changes in our lives. We've had too... And so, the ways we experience meaning and purpose have changed as well.

I thought it might be helpful to do a little reflecting with this... And I can only speak from my own experiences, and I would invite you to think about it for your own life and circumstances.

First of all, projects, work and relationships... Quick confession... When the churches closed for in-person worship, I was kind of nervous! Worship is, by definition, the *work* of the people. Giving praise and glory to God.

We come together in relationship as a community, we confess our sin, we are forgiven, God speaks, we pray. We are then sent into the world to love God and love our neighbor. For me, in-person worship is fundamentally meaningful. Worship is the ground, the foundation for directing ourselves and the community into productive life-- that is full of meaning and purpose.

Frankly, I was a nervous I might struggle. And to some extent I did. I remember that first Sunday, it felt so strange to be in a different routine. I still came to church; sat in the office and made a lot of phone calls...

I remember calling someone shortly after noon. I had called right in the middle of lunch. He politely let me know me he was eating... As we said good bye, I thought "Am I calling people for their benefit, or my benefit?"

One project I dove into was figuring out how to make worship videos. I had to find some way to dwell in God's Word and share it with our community. And to be perfectly honest, it has become meaningful to make them! They've become little projects, every week... And I hope and pray they are helpful for others.

Now, here's the rub... I really don't enjoy making worship videos...

I don't like recording, I don't like seeing myself as the stiff old man with a Minnesota accent, I don't like staring at computers, downloading and uploading, importing and exporting, editing audio and video, jpegs, mp3s and mp4s. Multi track recording, jpeg layers, producing and YouTube and whatever else...

And it continues to become more and more complex... I don't know what I'm doing and it's never ending!

This stuff has become my cross to bear! And frankly, it's just how I've picked up the cross and followed Jesus... It's work, it accomplishes something, and even though I don't enjoy it, it is meaningful...

This has been a challenging year for so many of us. I've told you about some of my challenges. And I imagine you've all had some similar struggles. So, how has your life changed? And how are you experiencing meaning and purpose in the midst of all these changes? Good things to think about...

The good news today is that Jesus is that Word that points us in the direction of abundant life. That has not changed... In our baptism we've been called, we love God, we love our neighbor, and by doing so we do experience meaning and purpose...

And we keep on, keeping on, listening to one another, praying together, loving and supporting one another... And in this brand-new year, 2021, we will emerge from this pandemic-- perhaps a little wiser, perhaps a little more grateful, and certainly with a renewed sense of meaning and purpose... Amen...