

October 25, 2020 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost Sermon notes

Deuteronomy 34.1–12 , Psalm 90.1–6, 13–17, 1 Thessalonians 2.1–8 , Matthew 22.34–46

Any parent, or grandparent, has had a conversation with a young child that ends with ‘just because’. After a series of ‘why’ questions it becomes clear that there will be no end to the questions and so the adult usually ends the conversation with ‘just because’. The question ‘why’ is often on our minds which the reason the following statement was made during a workshop I attended. “You should always start with ‘why’”. So said our Congregational Development Officer as he began the training session for the “Shaped by a Living Hope” teams. We learned what he meant by that as he explained that whenever we are assessing something we should always start with an understanding of why that something exists. If you are assessing your choice of which hammer to purchase it is important to know the purpose for which it will be used. If you are trying to find out if a ministry is effective then it is important to know what it is trying to accomplish. The question “why” becomes a sorting question and it is applied in many aspects of our lives these days without our realizing. As our lives have changed due to the pandemic restrictions we are faced with the question ‘why do we do these things’ alongside the question ‘what is most important’. We adjust to changing circumstances through our sorting out what is important and why are we doing these things. To a group of men in Lively the closure of the local Tim Horton’s restaurant caused them a considerable problem because one of the important things in their lives was the morning meeting. It wasn’t long before lawn chairs appeared on the property surrounding the restaurant as the men adjusted their behaviour in order to maintain this important aspect of their lives. The reason they met each day was to maintain their connections with their friends so they adhered to the restrictions while maintaining their connections with others. This is something we have all been doing whether we realize it or not. There are some things in our lives which we have allowed to drop away but other things for which we have adjusted our behaviour in order to comply with the restrictions but maintain the most important things. As we have done this we have, unconsciously perhaps, asked ourselves the question ‘why’ with ‘this is most important’. As Jesus confronted the Pharisees and Sadducees they asked him “which commandment in the law is the greatest?” to which he answered “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matt. 22:37-39) Why are human beings on earth and what is the most important thing for them to do are the two questions buried in the challenge raised by the Pharisees and Sadducees and they are questions we face every day even though we probably don’t realize it.

The nation of Israel stood poised on the eastern side of the Jordan River - ready to enter the

Promised Land. Their leader Moses had been ‘called home’ by God so Joshua, their new leader, would now be God’s voice for them as they took possession of the land that God had promised their ancestor Abraham. I wonder if during their grieving over the death of Moses they wondered why God was leading them in this way. After all, the journey which had taken 40 years was now on the brink of completion and they may have wondered, “was the purpose of God simply to get them to this land flowing with milk and honey or was there something else going on”? This 40 year long journey was actually only a small part of the much longer journey that began even before Abraham was called out of Ur of the Chaldeans. The journey began when God breathed life into the human race and gave them the task of being the image of God for the rest of Creation. The ‘why’ of human life is tied up in that mystery and so too is the why of the journey of the people of God.

We are told in the first few chapters of Genesis that God created humans ‘in the image of God’ which means a number of things. Among those meanings is the idea that when Creation looks upon humanity it can, potentially, see the image of God. The ‘why’ of our existence, therefore, is to show forth the image of God to the rest of Creation. The story of the ‘fall’ is a story of a failure to live out that pattern in the way God wished humanity to live. This failure has continued to impact the human race since its earliest days and God put together a plan to restore the original design. Abraham responded to God’s call to follow and his belief was ‘credited to him as righteousness’ and his descendants were promised a land in which to live and a purpose to which that life was to be dedicated. The why of the journey with Moses was, in part, to prepare them for the purpose of being the image of God for the other societies. Standing on the eastern side of the Jordan River placed that nation of Israel on the threshold of a major step toward fulfilling their purpose. Among the most important things was obedience to the commands of God and so the question asked by the Pharisees and Sadducees was a question that resonated with the people of God from the time of Moses at least. Jesus’ answer was a well known summary of the Law quoted from the pages of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. This short statement was used as a daily statement by devout Jews known as the “Shema”. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength and you are to love your neighbour as you love yourself” To live out the image of God the most important thing to consider is loving God and loving our neighbour. This was to be the way in which the nation of Israel would fulfill the ‘why’ of God bringing them to the promised land.

It is clear to me that Jesus wanted all people to understand that the two great commandments were the most important pillars in the structure of a human life. Jesus came to restore the image of God in humanity and make it possible for all humans, with God’s help, to live that fulfilling kind of life in

this age and in the age to come. So, what does that mean for you and for me as we live within these pandemic restrictions? Let me suggest a few things in the next few minutes.

Pastor Rick Warren became well known in Christian circles for his books called 'The Purpose Driven Life' and 'The Purpose Driven Church'. In those books Pastor Warren outlines ways to find your purpose and it all begins with the reality that we have been created in the image of God and our purpose within the Body of Christ is to live out that image according to the gifts we have been given. When the circumstances of our life are changed as they have been I have found it helpful to remind myself, and be reminded, of my purpose to live as the image of God for those around me by "Loving God with all my heart..." While this adjustment is never easy keeping our eyes fixed on the purpose will help us avoid becoming lost in turmoil. Not too long ago I was speaking with a teacher as she prepared to re-enter the classroom. There were, as you probably know, some fears, some frustrations, and the tremendous challenge of teaching in a Covid-19 environment. I was impressed with the way she focussed her attention on the most important part - helping her students grow in knowledge - and using her creativity and resources to find ways to address those needs. A similar kind of conversation was held with a colleague as he worked through the challenges of re-opening to public worship. Keeping in mind what was most important - providing a meaningful opportunity for his faith community to gather in worship - allowed him to adjust the liturgy and keep to main thing the main thing.

Loving God and loving our neighbour always needs to be at the core of what we do because in following this commandment we are better able to fulfil our purpose. Without these two ingredients the life God wants us to have would be impossible. What that will mean for your individual life will be different that what it will mean for the person across the room but the need for it to help you become a more fitting image of God will be the same. As we gather in these times of common worship we are asked to consider how our individual purpose can benefit our corporate purpose.

Loving God means, among other things, living according to his wishes by being kind, humble, loving and obedient to God's commands. Loving our neighbour means, among other things, being kind, humble, loving, and obedient to God's commands. In Jesus we see a man who managed to do those two things to perfection. As we continue to watch how Jesus lived through the stories that have been preserved we can assess how we are doing and bring our failures to God and have them cleansed. Jesus demonstrated what a truly human life looked like and his sacrificial death and resurrection provides the way in which every human being may find that same kind of life. My prayer is that in our gathered communities we will continue to foster that life.