

"Living Out Your Purpose"

Isaiah 49:1-6; Galatians 1:13-17

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

January 17, 2016 – 2nd Sunday after Sunday – Rev. Ronald Botts

Victor Frankl was a psychologist in Geneva, Switzerland, before he was imprisoned by the Nazis. His "crime" was being a Jew. What he saw in the concentration camp would change forever the way he looked at the world. Further, it altered his whole approach to the practice of his profession.

In the armed camp, under the same trying circumstances, he noted that some people fared far better than others. They survived despite the inhuman conditions in which they lived. They made it through and were not broken. Yet others, in much the same situation, simply went to pieces. They gave up and they died even before their jailers had a chance to kill them.

The difference, Frankl concluded, most often had to do with a sense of meaning and purpose—the stronger it was, the stronger the will to survive.

Well, Victor Frankl managed to survive his ordeal as well. After the war he wrote about his experiences and observations in the book *In Search of Meaning*. In it he says: "There is nothing in the world which helps a man surmount his difficulties, survive his disasters, as much as the knowledge of a life task worthy of his devotion."

This understanding of life has quite often been personally evident in my years of ministry. I particularly remember a member at one of my former congregations. She went by Babe and, at 97, had always been known for her spunk and resilience. It takes a lot to get to that age and still be able to live alone.

Over the years a typical visit to Babe's apartment would always begin by her asking me, "What do you know'?" What she was after was the latest about people in the church. Babe always had plenty of questions for me. How was so and so doing after surgery? How was someone getting along after retirement? What's happening with the children?

She certainly could have dwelt on her situation and health, but she didn't. We talked about her current circumstances, of course, then we left it. Other people were always foremost on her mind.

Babe said during one period of exceptionally bad health, "I sometimes just feel so useless. There's not much I can do." And I knew what she meant. She was partially blind, could hardly walk, and didn't have much energy. On top of this, she was having intermittent spells of dizziness. Yet I know that one of the last things she did before this bout of ailments hit was to send out get-well greetings to some of our ailing members.

I reminded her of the importance of those cards. Over the years she probably helped finance a whole wing at the Hallmark building. She was always sending letters and notes. In addition, she called people regularly to see how they were and to give them encouragement. Her telephone was the way that she got out beyond her doorway after she gave up driving.

The other important thing she did was to pray regularly for others. Every day she prayed for the church, for people she was concerned about, and for the problems and crises abounding in the world. She took prayer very seriously and never looked for excuses to put it aside.

Now Babe was never cited in *Who's Who* for those daily activities. She never won an award for her diligence. I can tell you this, though: what she did throughout her entire life are the very things that please God. I reminded her that the Lord doesn't ask us to exceed our natural limitations, but God does expect us to live up to them. This oldest member was a continuing example and inspiration to all of us in the church of any age.

Yes, she felt a bit useless at times, and that's understandable, but the fact is she wasn't useless. It's the genuine concern she had for others that was a big part of what kept her going. She had a purpose, and continued to live it out. That decision and that perseverance not only changed her life, but added to the lives of so many other people.

Paul, in a very autobiographical passage in writing to the Galatian church, speaks about his conversion. He wrote: "You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life...I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I had advanced in [religion] beyond many of my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, [it was] so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles...."

Paul, too, was a person with a clear and strong sense of purpose. I can think of few to match him. He was a man with a mission and he threw his whole life into it. He had enormous energy and stamina, not because he was superhuman, but because he was so visibly focused.

What he recognized, too, was that this purpose was both a gift and challenge from God. It wasn't something that he earned or deserved or carved out of nothing, but was given to him despite the things he had done and the way he had lived. There was no one more astounded at Paul's complete turnaround than Paul himself. He makes reference to it over and over in his letters. That day on the Damascus road is the defining moment of his life.

The prophet Isaiah also recognized that his life had meaning and purpose. He acted from the strong conviction that it was God's desire that he be a light to the nations, so that salvation might be brought to the ends of the earth. Like Paul his life had a center and, from it, sprang both words and works, acclamations and actions.

If you were asked today, "What is your purpose?" how would you answer? Is there something you could identify quickly and be able to put into words, or would the question cause you to hesitate? It's not a query we're likely to be asked point blank. Maybe it's one we should be asked even if we have to pose it ourselves.

You see it's not just apostles and prophets and exceptional people who are given purpose in life by God, but it's all of us. What we may fail to realize is that the magnitude of the mission is irrelevant.

I rather doubt if any of us are called, like Isaiah, to be a light to all nations. We might not write letters like Paul which will be read 2000 years from now. That doesn't matter. Those things were their purpose. Few of us are called to such public witness. Yet everyone has some purpose in their life, a mission which has been entrusted to them. The more we live that out, the more fulfilled we are likely to be. But first, we have to discover what it is.

When we do discern that purpose, we may have to make changes to live it out. Sacrifice may be involved, but we soon learn that whatever we give up will come back to us many times over. When we live out our purpose, we find we are energized beyond what we thought possible. We have a new outlook on life that is evident even from the moment we arise in the morning.

Purpose may be realized in many small ways as well as in one overriding direction. Perhaps your purpose centers around being a teacher and a nurturing mother. Perhaps it's in being a loving husband and helping to feed others in want. Perhaps it's to lead people to an awareness of Christ through how you live your life. Purpose is individual. In no two people is it exactly identical.

The Christian Science Monitor had a story some years ago about a fellow out West. Every morning he gets up and sits down at a desk in his living room. In front of him is an old calculator with a roll of paper on it. For the next hour or so he counts, one number at a time. He began counting with the number one and now he's up in the millions. His objective is to count to one billion. In fifteen years he's worn out 12 calculators and has hundreds of rolls of paper on his shelves, each with over 5000 numbers on them.

Every day he picks up from where he left off the day before. 42,672,426. 42,672,427, 42,672,428. And so on. He plan to keep at it until he reaches his goal of a billion. Now here's a guy committed to a purpose, but to what end? It's a purpose alright, but it hardly seems as if it would be of any real worth. We have to be careful not to settle on just anything, but the right thing.

So what does God hold out as important in your life? Have you asked yourself this question? Prayer is a good way to begin to find that answer. Reading the scriptures regularly will help. Talking with others may give us clarification. The resolution may not come at once but, with persistence, in time it will come. God has planted the answer within us. It is there to discover.

Each of us has a reason for being. Each of us has some job to do. It may even change in the course of time but, whatever our stage of life, we have something we are meant to be and something we need to do.

And even in time, when all our other callings eventually fall away, when we get to the point that we can only lie in our bed and not even arise, we can still praise God and pray for others. When everything else passes from our control, that faithful daily devotion and concern | will still be at our core.

So then take these two thoughts away from here today. First, the more we grasp our true purpose, the more alive we become. And second, the more we live out our mission, the closer we get to God. Dare to be the person that God intends for you to be!