

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

Sunday, April 29, 2018

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“Stay open for the best when you least expect it!”

There was a hairdresser who looked for the best when he least expected it. Except once when he met a Presbyterian.

A Roman Catholic priest went to his hairdressing salon, had a haircut, thanked the hairdresser and asked him how much he owed him. The hairdresser replied, "Father, you're a holy man, a man of the cloth, I just couldn't charge you anything, it's on the house." The priest was most grateful and said, "Thank you, my son" and left. When the hairdresser went to open his shop next morning, he found 12 gold coins on his doorstep.

Some days later, a Buddhist monk went to the same hairdressing salon for a shave and a wax. When he went to pay, the hairdresser said, "You don't have to give me any money, you're a spiritual leader, a man of the people, I just couldn't charge you anything, it's on the house." The monk bowed, shook his hand and thanked him. When the hairdresser went to open his shop next morning, he found 12 rubies on his doorstep.

The following week a Presbyterian Minister went into the hairdressing salon to have a haircut. When he went to pay, the hairdresser said, "No, pastor, I couldn't ask you to pay anything, it's on the house, you are a learned and wise man, go in peace." The Presbyterian blessed him and left. When the hairdresser went to open his shop next morning, he found on his doorstep 12 Presbyterian pastors!

There are a lot of people I know who find themselves in a waiting mode. Ever since the last recession there has been a sea change in our society. A lot of people we know are underemployed, out of work, there are reduced work hours, people laid get laid off, there are cuts to budgets and there seems to be no end in sight. There is a huge sense of helplessness, of simply hanging on, waiting for the effects of the last recession to go away and a prosperous middle class to return. We used to believe that if you work hard you would prosper.

Today the 1% who are really making it in society are surrounded by the 99%. The gap between the rich and poor is coming to be more unacceptable all the time.

But it is more than that. The daily dose of the news is discouraging, and we can get negative in our thinking. The social media are polarizing society and are being used to radicalize.

Last week it was Toronto for the latest utterly unnecessary tragedy as people were mowed down by a radicalized young man described as an Incel or involuntary celibate...a group which foster radicalization and violence on the internet against women as a bonding device for men who are angry.

But today it may be for you much more personal. Someone in your family is in trouble or is depressed or chronically lonely and discouraged. Each day is a challenge and it seems to get harder. You look for solutions and can't find them and it seems that you are waiting. But for what? Where is the joy, the meaning in life the excitement? Gone you say...

Iyanla Vanzant wrote a great book called The Value in the Valley for times just like these. Not all the time do we get to scale the mountain peaks of success. Sometimes we get to stay in the valley.

She says that when we have no idea what our purpose is, or whether or not we are living it, we tend to get mad, feel worthless, judge ourselves and hold resentments about whatever experiences we are having. However, when we *are open and always prepared to receive the best, when we least expect it, our purpose will become clear as it emerges from the most unlikely situations.*”

I think it is true that we are able to put up with almost anything when we have a clear goal to achieve. But when we lose sight of our goal we can get into trouble.

It was 1952 and Florence Chadwick, veteran of two successful English Channel swims was trying to swim from Catalina Island to the California coast. The water was icy cold, and the fog was so dense that she could hardly see her support boats. Her mother and trainer offered encouragement. Thousands watched on television. She was but a half mile from the shore. Sharks cruised towards her but were driven off with rifle shots. Everyone urged her not to quit but all she could see was the endless fog. With only half a mile to go she asked to be pulled out.

Talking to a reporter afterwards she said, “Look I am not excusing myself but if I could have seen land I might have made it.’ It was not the cold water or the fatigue that finally defeated her. It was the fog. She was unable to see her goal.

Is that you today?

When we lack purpose, little things can get to us. We can begin to get short tempered both with ourselves and others. Instead of looking at the positives in our life we can focus on the negatives because we feel blocked.

Moses is regarded by the Jewish community as one of the greatest spiritual leaders that ever lived. When we came across him in the desert story he was an unknown. He had the potential to be a world statesman, but he was in a literal and spiritual desert!

At least he had a job. But this greatly gifted man who could do so much more, was spending his time looking after sheep. Was he waiting for something and not aware that he was? Was a destiny waiting for him?

I don’t doubt that he was a good shepherd. It probably gave him a great deal of time to think, but that occupation only scratched the surface of his great abilities.

I think Moses was like many of us. He was going through the motions of living. He no doubt had his routine. But one day out of the blue, he noticed a bush on fire that did not burn up. Very curious he investigated and encountered *God!* Suddenly his life had purpose, he became animated and Moses under God changed the world!

Iyanla Vanzant says that our ultimate destination may not be a good job with a good salary. But when we try to launch our kids into the world isn’t that a lot of what we think about? Will they get a good job with a good salary we ask as we prepare them for college and save for their education? But if we ask, “what is a good job and salary for?” we might get a little closer to the real question which is “what is our ultimate destination and purpose in being on this planet?”

The Bible would agree with Iyanla when she says that peace of mind and discovering our particular spiritual mission links us to purpose. The Bible talks about a peace that passes all understanding as a gift from God. Have we asked for that gift? The Bible also teaches us to commit our life path to God for specific direction: “Commit your way unto the Lord and he shall direct your paths.”

The problem for many people is lack of that “on mission- life- purpose feeling.” Because they do not have that life mission, they don’t feel peaceful either. So how do we tackle that problem of finding a life purpose?

In the New Testament lesson we read Christ’s twin parables of the buried treasure and the great pearl. Both parables have common elements that we need to note. Both men were hard at work in their regular jobs. They were engaged with life; not sitting on the sidelines. Perhaps the mental state of the man ploughing the field was one of a despairing monotony. He had to work to put bread on the table but his economic status was not too rich. He did not own

the field. He was renting the land. He may have had this occupation for many years. But whatever his mood was he kept on showing up.

Let's note this: A big surprise comes in the midst of his everyday ordinary experience of ploughing. The plough hits something solid, the ox stumbles and the plough man investigates the problem. What is it a big stone?

No wait a minute! This is something else- a heavy box. In fact he discovers everything he has hoped and dreamed for- buried treasure that will turn his humdrum life into excitement and real potential. He had won the lottery!

Similarly, the pearl merchant may have been on the track of the greatest pearl of his life. "Oh if I could just one day find a big one- a pearl worth a fortune. Then my life would change!" In our terms it would be like winning the jackpot. Like the ploughman he keeps showing up and then one day *in his ordinary experience* he sees it in a market, unexpectedly. When he got up that morning he had no idea that this was going to be the day! For all we know he may have been depressed, at the end of his rope, we don't know. We do know that he had been waiting for this moment all of his life. This is no ordinary pearl, it is the pearl of a life time!

In the Epistle lesson a man who had been carried daily to the Beautiful gate of the Temple because he had been lame from birth, suddenly had the apostles walk across his path. He expected a gift of alms but received something he least expected. He was healed. His excitement was beyond bounds. He jumped up, walked around and then began leaping about praising God in front of all those who for years had known him as a lame man. Perhaps the most important thing for us to notice this morning is that all of these men, while doing their usual thing were open for the best. Their life purpose emerged from ordinary life experience.

In Palestine there are two bodies of water- one is alive with fish- the Sea of Galilee and other is quite dead, in fact it is known as the Dead Sea.

In our minds as people we can choose to be like one or the other of these bodies of water. The Sea of Galilee has an inlet and an outlet. The Dead Sea has an inlet and no outlet.

Our choice particularly as we age seems to be whether we will choose to remain in the Sea of Galilee mode or switch into the Dead Sea mode. The first way is to be open to growth, change, to new ideas and to let go of ideas that no longer serve us. The other way is to close on life, close on experience, put down new ideas, become cynical, rigid, and opposed to any form of change.

Now let's return to the man ploughing the field and let's assume the Dead Sea attitude has become his approach to life.

Ploughing! He has done this many times before. There cannot be anything new here. The bump comes. "Oh another blasted rock. This isn't my field. I'll just plough around it." He does so and his life stays ho hum! He misses the buried treasure!

The pearl merchant if he had the Dead Sea attitude would have seen it all before. He has been to these markets. There will be nothing new today. "Will I go and check out that last man's stand over there? Naw! I'll quit. Its lunch time. These local markets are not up to much. There cannot be any point in going on." *And he turns away from the greatest opportunity of his life!*

The man who went to beg at the gate Beautiful might, with the dead Sea attitude, have decided not to go to the Temple that day. Life as a lame man was so discouraging. He didn't like being a beggar. Where was God anyway?

I wonder is that you today? Are you discouraged? Have you become rigid, opposed to all change? Have you lost faith in the future? Have we forgotten that our God is able?

This Dead Sea attitude can also cause us to falsely value our lives when we are waiting in the valley.

A woman lost her job and was having difficulty in getting another. A friend urged her to volunteer in the field that she was interested in. Hesitantly she took a volunteer role. She only did so because she thought it might materialize in a job. It did not. But during this volunteering period this woman really helped someone who had a cancer diagnosis to carry on. The cancer victim actually got well and credits her healing to this volunteer who helped her. But because the volunteer did not respect what she was doing while she was waiting for a “real job” she could not see that she had played a pivotal role in the cancer victim’s cure. How sad is that?

I think it to be very important when we are in a waiting mode not to put ourselves down while we are waiting. **Peace of mind that comes from God can come when we are waiting, and in that valley of waiting we may well discover our life mission, when we least expect it.** If you are waiting today, ask for the Peace that passes understanding to be given to you. Our God is able!

Being open for a surprise from God reflects an active attitude of faith.

Rick and Diana had been childless for 12 years and twice they had tried unsuccessfully to adopt.

Rick was doing his daily ordinary thing when he came across his pearl of great price. He was in rush hour traffic when he heard a report about Russian orphanages on the car radio. In the midst of the report he heard a little boy called Vladimir sing. It was a particularly sweet little voice. Vladimir was a special boy that nobody wanted to adopt because he had club hands and feet. Vladimir’s tiny electrifying voice went into Rick’s heart and he knew immediately without doubt that he would adopt this boy.

But there were obstacles: Miles of red tape, a deadline suspending all adoptions after a certain date! Rick and Diane had degrees in music. They had been praying and waiting trying to inspire an answer from God. The timing was crucial. Vladimir was to be shipped off to a dreaded asylum. The day the adoption papers were signed was the day before all adoptions were to be suspended.

Six months after that radio broadcast, Rick and Diana flew to Moscow to pick up their son. The moment that Diana saw little Vladimir coming down the hall her heart almost burst for joy. Back In Ohio, Vladimir learned English, his shoulders straightened out from all the hugs he received daily, and they sang together every night as a family.

Florence Chadwick did not give up swimming or let that first experience determine her destiny. She stayed open for the best. In fact two months later in the same dense fog, she swam with her faith intact and her goal clearly in her mind because she knew that somewhere behind that fog, when she least expected it the land would suddenly appear! This time she made it, becoming the first woman to swim the Catalina channel, eclipsing the men’s record by two hours!

What do you need when you are in the valley? Persistence! Faith! Staying open for the best when you least expect it.

Rick Stafford, in the rush hour, with the radio on, as it was always on when Rick was in the rush hour, waiting...but then came that little voice, that pearl of great price...
I wonder what it will be for you?

Stay open for the best when you least expect it! The land will appear out of the fog.

Our God is able!

Amen.