

“Where Can Meaning In Life Be Found?”

Psalm 30

Galatians 1:11-24

I read an interesting article which referenced Time magazine discussing what it called ‘bizarre’ courses taught in universities today. Rutgers lists one as “Politicizing Beyoncé”. Siddmore College teaches one on “The Sociology of Miley Cyrus”. If you go to Santa Clara College the physics department offers “The Physics of Star Trek”. There is an interesting course at Princeton entitled, “Wordplay: A Wry Plod from Babel to Scrabble” (Homiletics, May-June, 2016, p.45-6).

Talking about college courses in general, observers note that they are inclined to be more neutral and descriptive. For example, they might look at a historical figure and what that person did or thought. However, they generally will not take the next step of helping students think about values and meaning for their own lives.

At Yale, there is conversation of instilling curriculum that is more directly engaged with implied meaning in our lives. Two courses address the question of meaning. Offered by Yale is a course entitled “The Life Worth Living”. From Yale’s divinity school one can take, “Christ and the Good Life”.

Matthew Croasmun, one of the course teachers explained in an interview with ‘The Huffington Post’ that “The question for the course for each tradition is, ‘What are the truth claims this tradition is making and, second, but more importantly, if those truth claims are true, how would your life have to change?’” (Homiletics, p.47).

How do we find meaning in life? Where do we find meaning? These are questions of philosophic enquiry underlying how we live and act. Is meaning found in living the good life? Is it in the pursuit of a goal? Recently Will Smith starred in a film, “The Pursuit of Happiness”, based upon a story of a homeless man and his son pursuing the goal of employment. Meaning can be relative based on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Or I might inquire, “What is the image I hold of the God I believe in? How do those beliefs shape my choices?”

Dr. Arch Hart, a psychology professor who taught a class that I took in Seminary made the point that meaning is not found in achieving the goal but in pursuit of the goal. After winning an Olympic Gold Medal, an athlete said he was lost once his goal was attained. That is all he had have done all of his life. It’s over. Now what?

As an adolescent and college student I remember being hyper-observant as I listened to others discuss what it means to attain a sense and purpose of meaning in life. What does Jesus mean when he tells me that “I must lose my life to find it?” (Mark 8:35). It begs the larger question, “Can I possibly possess a zeal and pursuit of something in the name of finding meaning but in the end discover that my life has been misdirected?”

There is something about the self-directed achievements of temporal goals, be it family, fame, fortune that we think will bring ultimate satisfaction. Once achieved, however, it is possible that the meaning we are searching for in these things may elude us, not feeding the deeper needs of our souls.

At this point we could ask what God might have to do with any of this. Paul's testimony draws us into this question. Paul found that in his pursuit of God and God's righteousness that he is on the wrong path. He thought he was serving God, but he wasn't. His understanding of who and what God is like is skewed. We need go no further than Isis to see the effects of a distorted understanding of the nature and character of God as it affects human behavior.

Let's take a closer look at Paul. As a strict Jew his conception of God is that of a task-master who demands strict obedience to the law and rituals of Judaism. In his own words Paul reminds those being seduced by his opponents, "You have heard no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors". His idea and understanding of God defined his actions.

What changed? Through his meeting with Christ Paul met a different God. In Jesus Christ Paul met a God of grace, of unconditional love. Grace, not law, reveals God's real and true nature. God is no longer a judge measuring our value and worth who hides behind the law. God is a person. Experiencing the grace of God is a personal transaction, a meeting of the transcendent God through the person of Christ. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). You might reflect upon how your own image of God has changed through the years and what has influenced that change.

Paul understands now that what he thought made him righteous made him prideful. In effect he says that he had it all backwards. This understanding is reflected in what he tells the Romans, "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith" (Romans 3:21-25). He boldly proclaims, "But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). He realizes that we attain righteousness not through zealousness for the law and traditions of Judaism, but through faith in Christ's righteousness. He sees both himself and God in a different light.

Most Bible proclamations to the wider culture are met with a yawn. Perhaps even in church. After all, we have heard it all before. We settle on being good, believing that God is on our side and pity the poor people who don't know God (Sojourners, May 2016). We forget that Jesus found faith among those without it. He also observed faithlessness among those who claimed faith in God.

What we believe shapes what we do and how we live. Paul claims as authority a direct experience of the revelation of Jesus Christ. His gospel does not derive from a human source. In this he identifies with the prophets. Isaiah writes, "Listen to me...pay attention...The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me...And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him." (Isaiah 49:1, 5). This call has a task assigned to it.

Similarly, Jeremiah writes how “the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations’” (Jeremiah 1:5). Again, note the assignment that comes with the call. No spiritual encounter with God is an end in itself.

David testifies to the same direct engagement with God’s Spirit. “O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those who have gone down to the pit” (Psalm 30:2-3).

The church is founded upon this experience with God in the revelation of Christ. Listen to what is written in the Presbyterian constitution. “The mission of God in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church...The Church’s life and mission are a joyful participation in Christ’s ongoing life and work...Christ calls the Church into being...God sends the Church into the world to share the gospel of God’s redemption of all things and people...Where Christ is, there is the mark of the Church” (Book of Order, p. 3-4).

Meaning is found in a who, not a what. It lies within our response to the question Jesus asks us, “Who do you say that I am?” I have found the most joy and meaning in my life by responding to the call of Christ to follow where he leads. I believe the key question we ask is, “Lord, what are you asking me to do?” Paradoxically, meaning is discovered not from within me and my self-chosen pursuits, but from outside me and following Christ into the lives of others. As one person put it, “Our culture worships wealth and superficial beauty, but what’s actually beautiful is holiness and God and the poor neighbor” (Sojourners, p.49).

I believe Miroslav Volf gets it right in his book, “Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace”: “We can be truly ourselves and free if God lives in us...not to be a self-made, self-standing individual over against God, but to exist from God and through God...United with Christ, we live in God, and God lives in us” (Homiletics, p.50).

“And they glorified God because of me”, Paul can say. May it be so with all of us.