

## WHICH PLANE ARE YOU ON?

(01/24/10)

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 1:10-17  
Acts 10:34-43  
Matthew 25:31-46

*“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’” (Matthew 25:44-5)*

I not only teach psychology at Assumption College, I also serve as an academic advisor. When it comes to advising students about particular courses or programs of study, I always ask them what they want to do with their life. This question invariably leads to the question: what do you think is the meaning of life and of your life? I believe the answer to that question might help the student decide what profession or career he/she might want to enter and then the course of study that would lead to that end.

The question is not an easy question to answer, even for students at a college that professes to have a religious emphasis in its academic program and campus life. I have a hunch that it may even be a difficult question for us, though we are Christians and members of a church. So let’s look at four possible answers or options, comparing them with the teaching of scripture and what we know of the life of Jesus.

Let me begin by saying that I do not believe there is a single correct answer to the question of the meaning of life in general and the meaning of our individual life in particular. I not only suspect, I hope we would answer the question differently when we are forty or sixty years old than when we were twenty. I also hope that our answer would evolve as our religious understanding and our spiritual journey evolve.

The first answer commonly given by people is to “be well,” by which they mean that they want to be healthy and happy. We know the saying, “If you have your health, you have everything.” The corollary to this, however, is “If you don’t have your health, you have nothing.” Is this really true? If you don’t have your health, e.g., if you have cancer, do you really have nothing? And is the goal, the meaning of life to be healthy?

Even though we would all prefer to be healthy and happy, this can't be the meaning of life or the meaning of our life. As we know, a tragedy or illness can radically change our life for the better. I think of how the fund raising and consciousness raising efforts of Christopher Reeve in the area of spinal cord regeneration and Michael J. Fox in regard to Parkinson's disease have made a tremendous contribution to medical science. I doubt either of them would have worked so hard for his cause had he remained healthy. I would hope that if we were confronted with some tragedy or if we contracted some chronic disease or condition, we would dig down to find a deeper meaning in life than simply being healthy and happy.

The second answer, a much more common answer, especially for young people, is to "do well." By this most young people and even adults mean that they would like to be comfortable, if not outright wealthy. As I tell my advisees, if you would like to be filthy rich, become a corporate CEO or a Wall Street stockbroker. Don't become a psychologist, a minister, or teach psychology part time in a college.

Although much of our life is spent earning a living or trying to earn enough money to live at a certain socioeconomic level, this can't be the meaning of life. If we look at the great people in the history of civilization, people who lived deep and meaningful lives, people like Jesus, Francis of Assisi, Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer, and Mother Theresa, they didn't seem to be concerned about "living well."

The third option, a more religious option, is to "be good." A moralistic approach to religion might lead us to think that this is the core element, the ultimate meaning of life. However, according to the standards of morality in his day, Jesus would have failed the test. He ridiculed the goodness of the Pharisees, accusing them of essentially being "good for nothing." He associated with tax collectors and sinners. He told a parable about a son who made a mess of his life but ended up even closer to his father as a result.

Good is a funny word. It has several different definitions or connotations. G. K. Chesterton noted that we might describe a man who shoots his grandmother at a distance of five hundred yards as a “good shot” but we would probably not describe him as a “good man.” I have been told that the difference between “he’s good looking” and “he’s looking good” is about twenty-five years.

It is interesting that in his description of Jesus in the Book of Acts, Peter does not say that Jesus went around “being good,” even though Jesus was the most “good” person who ever lived. Peter tells his listeners that Jesus went around “doing good.” If being good wasn’t the essence or meaning of Jesus’ life, perhaps it shouldn’t be the essence or meaning of ours. Perhaps it is more important to do good than to be good.

Some people believe God will love them only if they are good. Because of this belief, they carry the weight of every mistake, every sin, or they subscribe to a theology that is built around the forgiveness of sin. If God is like a loving parent, as Jesus suggests, we see that this approach misses the point. A good parent does not love his/her child because the child is good or because the child has been forgiven. A good parent loves the child because the child is his/her child. C. S. Lewis said that God doesn’t love us because we are good; God makes us good through the act of loving us.

The final option, the one that Peter mentions, is that a central part of the meaning of life is to do good. The prophet Isaiah tells us, “cease to do evil, learn to do good.” He tells us to “seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:16-17). The prophet Micah echoes this directive when he says,

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)*

Peter explains Jesus to his listeners by describing Jesus’ actions. He tells us that Jesus went about doing good and healing people. Jesus did that because he had been anointed with “the Holy Spirit and with power” at the time of his baptism. The way

Jesus spent his time on earth confirmed how the Holy Spirit was working in him and through him. It is a classic case of faith, the quality of our relationship with God, giving rise to works.

Albert Schweitzer once said there are two types of people: the helpers and the non-helpers. Schweitzer not only preached this philosophy, he lived it. He left a lucrative career as a physician, theologian, and concert organist to build a hospital in central Africa. He did not mistake doing good for doing well.

In our culture, we unfortunately often confuse doing good with doing well. As I was writing this sermon, my computer provided an example of this confusion. Every time I tried to type in the words “do good,” the computer program wanted to change it to “do well.” I know that according to the rules of grammar we should say, “I did well on this exam,” rather than “I did good on this exam,” but I would maintain that, despite what my computer’s grammar check believes, the words “do good” or “doing good” have a deep and profound meaning.

This past week, as I thought about the tragic earthquake that has devastated the people of Haiti and as I prayed about the hundreds of thousands of people who have lost their lives and the millions who have lost everything, I thought back to an earthquake that took place a little farther south several decades ago.

In December of 1972, a powerful earthquake devastated the city and the area surrounding Managua, Nicaragua. At the time of the earthquake there was a man staying in a luxury hotel in that city. As soon as he could, the man left the hotel, picked his way through the debris, and summoned his private jet to fly him to London where, at a price of 2500 British pounds a day, he took over the entire floor of a hotel. The man was the wealthy industrialist Howard Hughes.

At the same time, another well-known man was responding to the disaster in a different way. When the earthquake hit Managua, a right fielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates, who was in Puerto Rico for the off season, helped organize a relief committee

and chartered a plane to fly emergency supplies into the devastated area. That man was Roberto Clemente. As you may recall, Roberto Clemente was killed on December 31, 1972 when his plane crashed during his errand of mercy.

These two men probably had different answers to the question of the meaning of life. Both were successful and wealthy. They had “done well.” However, one man saw deeper. He saw that the meaning of life was to do good. While one was trying to save his life and health, the other was willing to risk both for a higher cause. Roberto Clemente, who is one of my heroes (and not because he had a lifetime batting average of .317), once said, “Any time you have an opportunity to make things better and you don’t, you are wasting your time on this earth.”

This is the question that confronts our church, our nation, and us as individuals as we shape our response to the overwhelming tragedy in Haiti. Which plane are we on? Are we moving into or moving out of areas of great human need? Are we responding as compassionate people or are we distancing ourselves emotionally and sliding into indifference?

I am not suggesting that Jesus was just a good man or that the meaning of his life was just to go about doing good. As Christians, we know he was much more than this. However, we should not overlook this element of his life and ministry. Jesus felt compassion for people in need. He fed the hungry; he healed lepers; he restored sight to the blind; he drove out the demons that possessed people. He did this through the power of the Holy Spirit within him. And he promised that if we empower the Holy Spirit who is within us, we will be able to do not only good things but great things.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, has been quoted as saying

*Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.*

Wesley was a pastor who practiced what he preached. On January 4, 1785, in the midst of a particularly cold winter, Wesley wrote in his journal,

*At this poor season, we usually distribute coals and bread among the poor. But I considered they needed clothes as well as food. So on this and the four following days, I walked through the town and begged 200 pounds in order to clothe those that needed it most. But it was hard work.*

I'm sure it was. Wesley was eighty-two years old when he walked through knee-deep snow in London collecting money and clothes on behalf of the poor. He, like Jesus, went about doing good.

It doesn't matter if we are healthy or sick, in robust health or infirm. We can still do good. It doesn't matter if we are wealthy, although if we are, as Roberto Clemente demonstrated, we have the opportunity to do good on a larger scale. The meaning of life is not to *be* good, if being good means not to do bad things, for one can live a very scrupulous life and make little positive impact on the world. Whatever the meaning of life is, it has to involve doing good in whatever ways we can as often as we can to as many people as we can. As we do this, we become co-creators with God both of ourselves and of God's world.

Once young people, whether they are in our church school, our confirmation class, or are students at the college where I teach understand this, the rest is easy. I tell them they need to become themselves fully. They need to identify their strengths, their gifts, and their passion, for in that passion is their call. Choosing a vocation is a matter of identifying these gifts, strengthening them, and then offering these gifts to others. This is how we find our meaning in life. If we do this, then even if, like Roberto Clemente, our life is tragically cut short, we can say we lived it to the full. At least we were on the right plane.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
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## **PRAYER FOLLOWING THE SERMON**

God, help us to remember the difference between living in the world and being of the world. Help us to remember who we are as spiritual beings. Help us to remember that we are called to live our lives as Jesus lived his. Open our minds, our hearts, and then our hands that we might become co-creators with you of our little corner of the world. Then open our vision to make that world bigger and bigger until it embraces all of creation. Amen.

## CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

- Epiphany
  - what happened on Epiphany?
  - 3 wise men came to see Jesus
  - they gave him gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh
- enact this
  - have 3 children march up to the front to lay their gifts before a 4th child
- then have the 4th child sit down
  - when Jesus isn't here any more, at least not as a baby in a manger,  
what can we do? How can we give him our gifts?
- give to our church (offering plates)
- show a picture of children who have lost their homes, family, etc. in the tsunamis
- show them a poster of the Heifer Project
  - help children and families around the world
- these are the kinds of gifts that make Jesus happy