

The Pursuit of Meaning

John 10:7-10

Preached January 31, 2010 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Introduction. In 2005, Steve Croft of 60 Minutes interviewed Tom Brady, one of the NFL's most successful quarterbacks. Tom Brady at that point had led the New England Patriots to three Super Bowl championships. Brady was sporting a 5 year - \$60 million contract. Brady had both fame and popularity. During the interview, Brady commented about his success and felt there must be something more for him. Then he said, "There's gotta be more than this." When Croft asked him, "What's the answer," Brady responded, "I wish I knew."

Brady's words are evidence that like most of us, he was searching for that which would give his life meaning. He was on a quest but his success as a football player and reaching his goals had not provided the level of meaning for which his soul craved. I believe that most of us share the desire for meaning – Why do we exist? Why am I here? For some, that desire drives us to be on the quest for meaning.

Looking for Meaning in all the Wrong places.

Unfortunately, Tom Brady did not find meaning in accomplishing his goals and being a successful quarterback in the NFL. His plight is not different from many who have lived and are living now. What many believe will bring meaning in life fall short of their expectations. All of this reminds me of an old song, "Looking for Love in all the Wrong Places." Many look for meaning in all the wrong places.

One of the richest, most thought provoking books of the Bible deals with one person's search for meaning.

Ecclesiastes was written by one identified as the "Teacher" who many believe was King Solomon. The manuscript tells of his quest for meaning in areas that yielded only "meaninglessness" to him.

Where the Teacher chose to look for meaning are the same places where many other human beings have looked or thought they should explore. He sought knowledge and achieved great understanding. He had the resources to indulge himself in every form of pleasure. He amassed great wealth and possessions. He rose to unprecedented levels of power. He was given great honor by others. He applied himself diligently to his work. His conclusion to all of these was: "*Meaningless, meaningless. All is meaningless.*"

His conclusion was not that any of these things were inherently evil or bad for a person, they just could not deliver in satisfying the deep quest of his soul for meaning.

How different is the Teacher's quest that of people we know or our own quest? How many people do you know who poured themselves into their work and climbed to the top (often sacrificing their relationships and health in the process) hoping to find meaning, only to discover that the title and the pay did not satisfy the longing of the soul? How many have you known who pursued pleasure after pleasure to find diminishing returns in providing purpose in their lives.

I have a confession. I have a difficult time finding things in our home. When I can't find something I am looking for, I will typically ask Patty where it is. Nearly always she knows where to look. I have learned that if I am looking for something in the wrong place, I will not find it. "It is in the pantry on the third shelf on the left hand side." Of course, I can look directly at it and not see it. I wonder, "Can any other husband relate to this?"

Where are we to look for meaning?

Abundant Life.

I believe John 10 gives us some important clues. This chapter has long

been one of my favorite chapters in the Bible. For me the images are powerful about the nature of Jesus as shepherd and the gate for the sheep. My favorite verse in this chapter is verse 10, particularly the latter part: *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.* The contrast between the thief and purpose of Jesus is pronounced. Jesus comes to give life. The life he offers is a life filled with meaning.

In the Greek NT, there are two words that are translated as life. The first is βίος which has to do with biological life. It is more of the mechanical functioning of animals – eating, breathing, heart pumping – basic human existence. The second word is ζωή – which has more to do with the vitality and quality of life. This type of life has to do with living with meaning and purpose. One can be alive physically (βίος) but have no ζωή.

I remember that when I was in seminary one of my professors contrasting our present time in doing ministry with doing ministry a hundred years ago. He said, "Most people then were asking, 'Is there life after death?' Now people are asking, 'Is there life before death?'" The life people are longing for is ζωή.

Jesus said he came to give people ζωή – vital and meaningful life. He came not to provide one dose of this type of life but to give it in abundance. Christ wants the sheep to have life in superabundance. Through this super abundant life, we find meaning.

The Jesus Gate to meaning.

I believe there are at least three fundamental points of reference that give direction in our pursuit of meaning. From these flow meaning that satisfies this deep desire of the soul.

The first is meaningful service to others.

Victor Frankl was a Jewish physician who was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camps. After his liberation, he wrote the book *Man's Search for Meaning*, in which he told of his

experiences in the concentration camps and his later psycho-therapy practice. Out of the terrible and seemingly meaningless situations in the camps where he was imprisoned, he came to believe that there was not merely a single and unifying meaning for all people but that meaning was different for each individual. Additionally, he maintained that meaning was different for each person at different points of life. He found among the prisoners, having a purpose beyond the camp (caring for one's family, finishing project) were critical for survival. Those purposes gave meaning to people's lives and provided the will to live in horrible situations.

I share a large portion of Frank's ideas about the search for meaning but will in a few moments draw some distinctions. I do think that meaning to some degree is unique to each of us, especially as it flows from the point of reference of purposeful service. Purposeful service motivates us and gives meaning. It gives us a reason for living and provides breath for ζωή.

My mother suffers with health problems that limit what she can do. It is not uncommon to call and find that she is feeling poorly and has little motivation to be about the house. But if some of her family are coming or one has a need, my mother will respond. She will rally from her sickness doldrums and do everything necessary to prepare and to serve her family. She gains a reason for being. Her service as a mother and grandmother give her meaning.

The second point of reference in our pursuit of meaning is community. Out of relationship with others flows meaning.

The imagery of John 10 lends itself to thinking about community. As Jesus speaks about the sheepfold and the sheep, his hearers see in their minds a flock of sheep. They knew that any sheep that was separated from the flock was at great risk. You may remember the parable of the shepherd who left the 99 sheep to find the one. The one needed to be with the flock in order to survive.

Like the sheep, we need community and out of community meaning flows into our lives. As we live life together, work with and serve one another, deal with the

issues with which we struggle, process theology and life questions and experience the love of God's family, life is given meaning. Something happens in our experiences of being together and our ongoing relationship with each other.

First-Centenary is blessed to have one of the healthiest Sunday Schools of any United Methodist church in this region. Any time average Sunday School attendance is greater than 50% of worship attendance, that is excellent. Our average is over 70%. I believe one of the reasons our Sunday School is so strong is the people who participate in the classes find this weekly experience meaningful. In fellowship with others, they find significant community. The participants find a deeper sense of meaning out of the relationships with others in the class and the interaction that is experienced not only on Sundays but also other days of the week. This helps bring people back to Sunday School each week.

The third point of reference in finding direction in our pursuit of meaning is found in the image of our text this morning – Jesus said he is the gate for the sheep. For us, Jesus is the gateway to meaning, particularly ultimate meaning.

It is important to understand that meaning has a transcendent quality. While to some degree we might be able to describe meaning, it is beyond what we are fully able to describe. It is not necessarily something we find at the end of our search. It is not so much that we find meaning but meaning finds us as we walk through the Gate. In our coming and going through the Gate of Jesus, life becomes clearer and meaning more firmly planted in our hearts and minds. Even when life does not make sense, in Jesus we have the calm assurance of meaning.

Will Willemon in *The Search for Meaning*, a book he co-authored, wrote:

The Christian claims that meaning in life is more than a subjectively derived, existentially achieved invention. Meaning is a gift of a gracious God who does not leave us to our own devices. God reveals Godself to us graciously, generously through the scriptures, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, in the prodding and support of sisters and brothers in the church. The

meaning we find in life is therefore as much a gift as a discovery. We call it grace. Christian meaning . . . is personal – God's relationship with each of us (203).

Today the people of Haiti could feel that life seems meaningless in the midst of utter destruction that has cost the lives of over 200,000 people, injury to another 250,000 people and homelessness to 1.5 million. The challenge of getting relief to the people intensifies this tragedy. But in the midst of this meaninglessness, here two stories where people found meaning.

In Haiti at the time of the earthquake were three United Methodist leaders staying in the Montana Hotel in mission for Christ: Rev. Clint Rabb (head of VIM), Rev. James Gulley (a consultant for UMCOR), and Dr. Samuel W. Dixon, (head of UMCOR). All three were trapped by the collapse of the hotel. Dixon died before the rescue and Rabb died in a hospital a few days later. Gulley shared that they had told stories, remembered their families, endured the pain and suffering, and in the midst of it all, had sung hymns together before their rescue. When they were discovered in the rubble, Gulley said that they sang the Doxology. (http://www.qbod.org/worship/default.asp?act=reader&item_id=48457&loc_id=17,1003)

I invite you to close your eyes and listen to a segment of NPR Morning Edition from January 20 about what a reporter witnessed as relief supplies began to reach some people. (Play segment of woman singing, "Hallelujah" - <http://www.npr.org/templates/player/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=122755214&m=122755236>)

Invitation.

This morning I want to ask you to join our sister in this song of praise to God. Let us share in the gift of meaning she discovered.