

## **“Finding Purpose” – Ephesians 1:11-14**

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Gracious God, thank you for this life and for your love that sustains us. Help us to find rest in this time of Sabbath, renewal in our sense of purpose and understanding of call, and joy in each step as we seek to follow where you lead. Amen.

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Today we continue our sermon series on *Choosing the Life of Joy* in which we are exploring some practices that can aid us in living with openness to joy, in nurturing our wellbeing, and in finding fulfillment in our daily living. And today we’re considering the practice of finding purpose.

I think that a sense of purpose is something most people want in life. We want to live with a feeling of direction and intention. We want to give something of ourselves to the greater good. We want to leave our mark on the world. We want to contribute creatively, intellectually, and socially. This is part of how we find meaning in our lives.

And, of course, there are many dimensions to finding and fulfilling our purpose in life. We find purpose in our vocational and career paths, in our family life and relationships, in our participation in our various communities and organizations (including church), and more.

When we consider this idea of purpose from the perspective of faith, I think it is really a question of calling. Who is God calling us to be in this life? More specifically, what about right now? Who is God calling us to be at this time and place? These are personal questions for each of us as we discern our own individual paths. And these are also questions for our church – who is God calling us to be (collectively) as a community of faith?

The church in every age has asked this question. And the writer of Ephesians offers an interesting answer, an interesting theology of purpose. The author of Ephesians was probably not the Apostle Paul, by the way, (even though he is named in the letter) but someone who knew of him and respected his mission and ministry.

The church in Ephesus (in modern Turkey) was probably a generation or more removed from the earliest Gentile Christian communities in Asia Minor. And they, like so many before them and after them, had to figure out what their purpose was. They may have faced their own questions of identity. And certainly they felt challenged at times to stay faithful and true to their calling – in the midst of Roman rule, in the midst of life’s various trials. We all do at times.

And so the writer of Ephesians reminds them of their inheritance and their destiny in Christ. These are big words – inheritance and destiny. These are words of purpose and calling that come from a higher authority. These are words that speak of a foundation that was laid in the past, that has made possible the present, and that speaks to the possibility of the future.

These are words that are intended to encourage and inspire the Ephesian church by helping them to remember that when they put their hope in Christ, they find that their lives are created

for praise; they are made to glorify God. And they are reminded that their purpose both as individuals and as a church is not limited to their individual finite human journeys; it is much bigger than that.

Have you ever thought that you are created to glorify God and to let your life be an expression of praise? For the author of Ephesians, that is our most basic purpose.

And I love this idea. First, I love it for its simplicity. We can get so bogged down sometimes in trying to do everything perfectly, or not wasting time, or measuring our success by the metrics of the world, or stressing out over the growing to do list, or feeling bad when we mess up, or beating ourselves up when we fail. But perhaps when we get bogged down by any of these things we can get unstuck by refocusing our attention to simply praising God. To God be the glory for the breath in our lungs, for the beauty around us, for love that never gives up. Perhaps just simply shifting our focus to praise is a helpful step.

Second, I love this idea for its infinite possibility. There is no one right way to praise and glorify God. There are many. Use your gifts. Serve others. Contribute your intellect, your creativity, your work, your resources, your passion, your love... all of these are expressions of praise; all of these are fulfilling your purpose.

And, in doing so, trust that Holy Spirit is with you. That is also part of this reminder from Ephesians. We are not alone. We don't have to do this all by ourselves. And, if we get stuck, the Holy Spirit is there to accompany us and help guide us.

And this is also so much bigger than just our individual lives, of course. Our praising, our serving, our glorifying, our living (all of this) is in service to God's greater purpose: the redemption and liberation of all creation, of all life. Our individual lives connect to our collective life in this world. And God's Spirit is the very connective energy and vitality that holds all of us and all things together. In the words of Ephesians, God is "above all, through all, and in all." (Ephesians 4:6)

Now this might sound like a tall order – that God needs us to help bring about the liberation of all creation. It is. But let it also put your heart and mind at ease. It's not all up to you. Do your part to the best of your ability. But also trust in others to do their part and encourage them along the way. And place your hope and trust in God's Spirit to keep moving and keep working.

On a practical level, I think it is also important for us to recognize that this process of finding a sense of purpose in our lives is ongoing. It's not something we just discover one day and then we're done. Certainly there are big moments where we make big decisions that set us on certain paths – like a career choice, marriage, or parenthood.

But life is also full of lots of little daily decisions and smaller moments of discernment. This can be as simple as asking ourselves: How will I use my life this day to share God's love with those I meet? How will I praise and glorify God in my day's tasks? Sometimes all we can do is take it one day at a time, even one moment at a time. Finding purpose doesn't necessarily have to be some sweeping, grand project. Instead, finding purpose is a daily practice of openness.

And I think it can sometimes be really helpful, especially in the more monotonous moments, to spend a moment reflecting on how whatever it is that we are doing right now connects to our

deeper sense of purpose. That might uncover a new layer of meaning. That might just bring a little more joy to even a mundane task. Or if, in this reflection, we discover a total disconnect, or a real draining lack of joy, or find we're on the verge of burnout, that might lead us to make some necessary change in our lives. And change is ok. And taking a break is ok. (Who needs to be reminded that it is ok to take a break? – It's ok!)

I'll confess, I've never particularly liked the popular phrase, "God has a plan for your life." If it works for you, that's fine! But to me, it sounds like God has already figured it all out for us, as if God is moving us around like pieces on a chessboard and leaves little room for human freedom of choice. But I don't think that's how life works. We do have free will and we do make choices. And what happens when plans fail, when plans change because they need to? What about when what seemed to be in line with God's plan goes tragically wrong? Was *that* God's plan? What *is* God's plan in those times?

To me, plans seem a bit rigid. But purpose is something broader, deeper, and more resilient and flexible. Even when plans fail or change, we don't have to lose our sense of deeper purpose, God's deeper purpose. Instead, we can regroup, reconnect, and find a new way forward and make new plans. And even if we feel a little aimless, directionless, or bogged down for a little while, that's ok. God is still with us in that experience. It doesn't mean we've lost our purpose. So perhaps we can be a little gentler with ourselves in those moments. And perhaps we can view those times as preparation for new growth, for the next leg of the journey.

Living into our God-given purpose does take our ongoing active, creative, faithful involvement. I find that inspiring and invigorating. God has given us the freedom to help shape our lives and to help shape the world around us toward a vision of liberation.

But how do we do that? How do we engage in that ongoing process of discernment? It is helpful to have some tools for our reflection.

Pastor Dave has mentioned the Greater Good in Action project at UC Berkeley, which was part of the inspiration for this sermon series. One of the tools they offer is a process of how to talk to teens about purpose. It is focused towards young people who are just getting ready to finish high school and think about what's next. But I actually think it is a process that any of us can adapt for our own use at our various stages in life.

This practice involves three steps. First, have a discussion with a close loved one (or this could easily be a personal journaling project, if you prefer) in which you respond to the following questions for yourself:

- What is most important to you in your life?
- Why do you care about those things?
- Do you have any long-term goals?
- Why are these goals important to you?
- What does it mean to have a good life and be a good person?
- If you were looking back on your life, how would you want to be remembered?

Second, seek input from some other trusted people and ask them to respond to the following questions:

- What do you think I'm particularly good at?
- What are my greatest strengths?
- What do you think I really enjoy doing?
- When do you think I'm most engaged?
- How do you think I'll leave my mark on the world?

And finally, third, think about the future. Choose a timeframe that works for you, but imagine your life in 2, 5, 10, or 25 years from now. What do you see?

(If you want to see this practice in its entirety, please visit:  
[https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/talk\\_with\\_teens\\_about\\_purpose](https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/talk_with_teens_about_purpose))

These are good questions. And I think reflective exercises like this can help us regroup, and refocus, and give us a boost, especially when we feel a bit stuck. And if you need trusted companions to help you with this process, perhaps you might find some here at church.

This kind of process is actually nothing new, as it turns out. In fact, the Quaker tradition has engaged in collective discernment since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. As you may know, the Quakers emphasize the importance of listening to one's own inner spiritual guidance (the inner light) and believe that God's voice can be found within and can emerge into the community through any individual.

So, they created clearness committees to help one another with this discernment process. So whether someone is dealing with a particular struggle or dilemma or simply wants some help in making a decision, they could gather with a clearness committee to help get some direction.

But, here's the thing, the clearness committee members don't give advice, or talk about themselves, or tell the person what to do. Instead, they ask open-ended questions to help the person reflect, and go deeper, and find their own answers.

There is great wisdom in this, I think. Sometimes what we need most is a caring listening ear and the space and opportunity to reflect.

So, wherever you find yourself on your journey in this moment, whether you have a clear sense of purpose or you are figuring out what that means for you today, remember that God has loved you into being, and called you to contribute your part to God's great work of liberation.

Don't worry too much about all the details. Just let your very living be an act of praise to God's glory. For you are made in God's image, and others see God a little more clearly when you let your light shine.

Thank you for being you!

Amen.