

"What Is Saving Your Life Right Now? Living with Purpose"
Luke 5:1-11

This week we focus on the practice of living with purpose to allow God to bring healing and wholeness into our lives. What does the practice of living with purpose look like during this pandemic? When the pause orders started, many of us were deemed non-essential workers or businesses. The work (paid or volunteer) we spent so much of our lives on was put on hold or changed to remote and online. All of our assumptions about productivity and work had to be reassessed in light of the priority of preserving human life. This reminded me of the many times I have faced the question by the elderly, often in a nursing home or who are homebound: Why am I still here? What is the meaning of my life if this is all I can do? We all face the question about our purpose in life at different times in our lives such as: When we are starting school, graduating from school, deciding on a career, entering into romantic relationships, having children, children leaving the home, getting a job, changing careers, or retiring. In all of these experiences, there is the essential question: What is my purpose here on earth?

Right now, this question is even more pressing. For some, this question is getting a resounding affirmation if you are an essential worker (health care worker, first responder, grocery store clerk, etc.). For others, this question is bringing up a lot of anxiety, fear, and uncertainty. No matter where we are on the spectrum of purpose, it has become clearer to us during this crisis that our vocation/purpose in life is larger than our careers, jobs, or daily activities.

This week I hope that we can all take a long loving look at our purpose in the largest possible sense as human beings and yet also in the most particular way for each of us.

For the big picture of purpose, Barbara Brown Taylor quotes the 16th Reformer, Martin Luther, saying, "Whatever our jobs in the world happen to be, Luther said, our mutual vocation is to love God and neighbor." Vocation is larger than a job or a role that you have in life. It is about our larger purpose in life which is to love and to be loved. Our specific ways of fulfilling that vocation are unique to each one of us and our particular gifts and stories. They also vary from time to time depending on our circumstances. Most of us have multiple careers and activities in our lives. Think about it. Your profession could be a teacher, but you are also a volunteer, a customer, a patient, a parent, a sibling, a friend, a traveler, and much more. Even if you are in a nursing home or homebound, you still have many roles that impact a lot of people. The real issue is not our lives have a purpose or not. It is instead whether we are aware of it and intentional about it or not! Are we living with purpose or not? Our lives have a purpose. Our work is to live each day with that purpose in mind.

We will look at the example of the calling of the first disciples and how Jesus helped them see their purpose. This is according to Luke 5. Jesus had been working on the hearts and minds of these people nudging them to see themselves in the larger picture of life and faith. In fact, in the previous chapter, Jesus was in Peter's home and healed his mother-in-law. So this was not the first time Peter had encountered Jesus. But on that day, something really shifted for Peter. Peter and his companions were doing what they normally do. They were fishing. This was their life's work. They provided for their families through fishing. And that day was not a good day on the job. They had worked all night and caught nothing.

Jesus called these fishermen while they were doing their daily work. He helped them see their work as part of God's larger plan for the healing of the world. Jesus' way of healing the world was to start a movement of people who saw their work and their existence through God's eyes and who worked for the values of the kingdom of God in the world.

I would like us to look at three elements in the story as they relate to our own experience of living with purpose to love God and to love our neighbors, no matter where we are on the spectrum of career and vocation.

1. The Time of Day: By the standards of the world, Jesus' timing was not all that great. Peter and his companions had been fishing all night! They were tired. They could have said, "been there, done that." Not only that, daytime was not the best time for fishing. But in the midst of their weariness and hopelessness, they follow what Jesus tells them. And that is part of the lesson of the story. There is no right time or wrong time to fulfill our purpose. Any time and any given moment could be the time God uses, if we are open and willing. We just need to believe that our gifts and abilities are adequate enough to do the work of love.

2. Fishing: This was the main source of income for a lot of people in Galilee. Peter and his fishing companions were ordinary folk that a rabbi would not have gone out to seek as his followers/disciples. In fact, it was pretty unusual for a rabbi to go out and seek disciples. It was supposed to be the other way around. But Jesus reached out and built his group of disciples in his own unique way. He called ordinary folk, fishermen, to be the leaders of his movement. Fish became an important symbol for Christianity because the Greek word for fish (ICHTHUS), works as an acrostic for I = Jesus, CH = Christ, TH = God's, U = Son, S = Savior (Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter). Fishing could become for us a reminder of how God uses us in our ordinary tasks and daily activities to share love. Loving God and our neighbors is something that all of us can fulfill. Any task or job could become a vehicle for love.

3. Into the Deep: The place to which Jesus invited the disciples to go fishing is referred to in our story as going "into the deep." This would have been a clear reference to the early followers of Jesus to the symbolism of chaos in the story of creation. In Genesis 1 we read, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep..." For the Jewish people, "the deep" represented the chaos that threatened God's order and security. So the willingness of Peter, James and John to go out into the deep is a symbol of their willingness to go to the edge of the abyss for the work of ministry. This could be a reminder for us during this time of great fear that what we do for love matters a great deal. The mission of God's love is dependent on our willingness to step out in faith to do the next loving thing we are nudged to do. Our call to love God and our neighbors is dependent on our willingness to enter the depth of the chaos of this moment while holding on to love. Being intentional each day to remember that we are called to live each moment with love. I saw this last week in the sharing of the flower baskets and in the children and youth who shared love through their chalk art around town.

The three symbols or elements of this story of call remind us that our larger purpose of loving God and loving our neighbor can happen anytime and with any activity we are involved in. What we need is to be intentionally aware of that purpose each day in our own particular context.

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests for this practice that we do something mundane but with awareness of its connection to our greater purpose of love. She writes, "I no longer call such tasks housework. I call them the domestic arts, paying attention to all the ways they return me to my senses." It does not matter if our role is big or small, the point is to do it with love. As Mother Teresa put it, "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love." Amen.