

Sunday September 24th, 2023

Philippians 1:21-30
“Death Wish?”

Some years ago, Time Magazine featured a story about Peter Sellers, a well-known English actor. The article was about him appearing on the Muppet Show & being interviewed by Kermit the Frog. His interview began with Kermit telling Peter, "Now, just relax & be yourself." Peter Sellers responded, "I can't be myself because I don't know who I am. The real me doesn't exist." Now I suppose that Peter Sellers was trying to be funny, because he was a comedian by trade. But on this occasion his words were anything but funny. In fact, they were rather sad.

One of his long-time friends, commenting on his words, said, "Poor Peter! The real Peter disappeared a long time ago. What he is now is simply a mixture of all the stage & screen characters he has ever played, & now he is frantically trying to unsnarl that mess & find out who he really is." I don't know if Peter Sellers was ever able to unsnarl that mess, for just six months later he was dead. But whether he did, he isn't alone in his confused feelings.

“Why am I here?” “What is the purpose of my life?” The brilliant Dr. Seuss gives an insight:

If you'd never been born, then what would you be?
You might be a fish or a toad in the tree.
You might be a doorknob or three baked potatoes.
Worse than all that, you might be a wasn't.
A wasn't just isn't. He just isn't present.
But you—you are you. Now isn't that pleasant?
Today you are you, and it's truer than true
That there's no one alive who is you-er than you.
Shout loud, “I am lucky to be what I am!
Thank goodness I'm not just a clam or a ham
Or a dusty old jar of gooseberry jam.
If I am what I am, and it's a great thing to be.
If I say so myself, happy birthday to me!”

Why are you here? Why do you exist. Do you ever ask that question. Ponder it deeply. What answers if any have you been able to uncover? Well, the correct answer by way of the Christian faith seems straight forward enough, but still, we struggle to implement it into our thinking and behavior.

The most accurate and truthful answer as to why we are here is because God wants you here. God has created you to be you and not somebody else. God has a purpose for you and that is to be a child of God, to have fellowship with God, to be God's woman or man here in this place, right now. We read in Genesis: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness . . . God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them.’”

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You are a special creation of God. There has never been someone like you and there never will be someone like you again. You are a unique gift and blessing of God. You are more than a fish or a toad or a clam, you are the very image of God.

Woman or man, young or old, happy, or sad, you are here because God wants you to be here. You are here because God put you here. Just ponder the power of that truth. Now that being said, on the other hand, we may wonder at times what God has in mind with us. Humanity often doesn't seem so wonderful. Read the newspaper, turn on the TV. Human beings are as mixed up as they can be.

Malcolm Muggeridge looked around and commented,

“Our time is probably the most degraded and unilluminated
ever to come to pass on earth.
Science and education have promised us a brave new world,
but supermarkets, the rainbows ending at the nearest bingo hall,
leisure burgeoning out in multitudinous shining TV aerials
rising like dreaming spires into the sky,
happiness in as many colors as there are pills,
green and yellow and blue and red and shining white,
many mansions of light
and chromium ever upward.”

Then we look at pictures of the effects of hurricanes and floods. People who have nothing left—no homes, no work, no hope. It is easy to find blame—New Orleans was a hedonistic city, there was environmental degradation, poor government, bad management. Yes, we can learn from disasters, and learn plenty, but what we need to learn too is our common humanity. We are human beings more alike than we are different. A familiar saying says,

“I looked at my brother through the telescope of criticism
and said, ‘How coarse my brother is’.
I looked at my brother through the microscope of scorn
and I said, ‘How small my brother is’.
I looked into the mirror of truth
and I said, ‘How like me my brother is’.”

Hear what Martin Luther says of our common humanity:

“What good comes of man?
He eats and drinks only the best bread,
wine, beer, precious spices too.
He excretes nothing but corruption,
snot, sputum, matter, sweat,
sores, pox, scruff, slough,
discharge, pus, dung and urine.

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He clothes himself in satin and gold,
spreads lice, nits, fleas and other vermin.”

We wonder who we are and why we are here. Dietrich Bonhoeffer raised the question, “Who am I?” from behind the walls of a Nazi prison.

He considered the contradictory answers of others considering what he saw himself to be. To others he appeared strong, serene, self-sufficient; to himself, sick, empty, weary. But in all this, his trembling faith affirmed, “Whoever I am, thou knowest, O Lord, I am Thine.” Even as we recognize our failings, we also hear God’s Word to us: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people

. . . Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people. Once you had received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” While we were yet sinners, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. We are at the same time, saints and sinners, people who fall short of God’s intention and a righteous people for God.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians describes his predicament.

“For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.
If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me;
and I do not know which I prefer.
I am hard pressed between the two;
my desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is far better;
but to remain in the flesh is necessary for you.”

Paul wondered what his purpose was, why was he still on earth when he wanted to be with the Lord. The answer he gives, “to live is Christ, to die is gain.” He recognized clearly that he was here for a purpose, for fellowship with God in his life and for eternal life. You are here for the same reason. You are God’s child and God’s image. You are here to bring others to a knowledge of the truth which is Jesus Christ and to glorify God in your life.

“God is love.” That was a very good answer— St Augustine once defined God simply: “God is love and that is all you need to know about God. But the consequences of that love are life altering to say the least. J.I. Packer wrote in his book “Knowing God”, “that what matters supremely, therefore, is not, in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it—that he knows me. I am graven on his palms of His hands. I am never out of his mind.

All my knowledge of Him depends on His sustained initiative in knowing me. I know him because he first knew me and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who loves me, and there is no moment when his eye is off me, or His attention distracted from me, and no moment, therefore, when his care falters. This is monumental knowledge. There is unspeakable comfort...

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In knowing that God is constantly taking knowledge of me in love and watching over me for good. There is tremendous relief in knowing his love is utterly realistic, based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst of me, so that no discovery now can disillusion Him about me, in the way I am so often disillusioned about myself, and quench His determination to bless me.” How incredible are Packer’s words and the truth behind them?

Think about how thinking about God in this way could change our lives.

I have said many times that “all theology is transformative”. If you really believe something it should make a difference in your life. When you believe something about God you are never the same. This idea of transformational theology, which I have espoused for years is at the heart of a school of theology, which I didn’t know existed until this week. It is called Transformational Christianity.

This theology defined means: Transformational Christianity interprets the gospel from a unified perspective of transforming individuals, relationships, and institutions. It thus tends to align intellectually with evangelicals, emotionally with charismatics, and socially with ecumenicals—though only up to a point. The emphasis is less on being theologically or politically correct than on being effective in transforming the believer and the world around.

One defining aspect of transformationalism is its focus on what are called *marketplace ministers*. In this context, as in many Christian circles, the term 'marketplace' is used to represent business, education, and government—i.e., everything outside the church and family. The heroes of most other movements are celebrated for their church-related activities (e.g., evangelists, missionaries, bishops, apostles, etc.).

In contrast, the heroes of transformational theology are not valued just for making money, or even just for bringing people into the church; rather, they are seen as the primary carriers for bringing the "kingdom of God" or "presence of Jesus Christ" into the world.

In one sense, this is a return to the ideals of the Protestant reformation, with its emphasis on the "priesthood of all believers" and the value of secular work. A related innovation is the concept of citywide pastoring. The key premise is that in addition to the concepts of one "church universal" and many "local congregations," which most Christians accept, there is also a third level: "the church in the city". The idea is that all the congregations in a particular region, of whatever denomination, are really aspects of a single church family, and should actively think, plan, and work together under that common framework.

This doesn't mean that a single unifying structure is imposed from above, as in the old establishment idea of parishes. Rather, it involves formalizing the existing networks of relationship and trust into a coherent organizational structure, usually involving councils of recognized leaders from different communities. This typically means the church as a whole develops a common vision, which is implemented by individual congregations with minimal explicit coordination. It also enables the Christian community to speak with one voice when dealing with local government; however, the focus is usually on finding ways to cooperate in serving the community, rather than dictating policy. (Wikipedia)

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Sound familiar? Is this not what Church Out Service and Riverside 83 are seeking to do?

It is often said that Christians are the only Bible the world will ever read. You can be a Bible for your friends and neighbors as they see your faith and life. We read in the newspaper recently how with the death of Billy Graham, the great crusades and rallies of the past century may not continue. The writer said that the way to reach people today is in a quieter way, one-on-one, letting other people know you care about them, and that God cares too.

Jim Wallis, the editor of *Sojourners* magazine, uses an excellent phrase for our day: “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.” Think about that. We are the prophets and sages and witnesses for today. We are the disciples and apostles to this community, at this time. We are the chosen people of God for our neighborhood, apartment, school, golf course or wherever life takes us.

Sometimes it is older people who ask me the question, “Why am I here?” Often, I am asked this in the context of why they live on and on, when others are struck down in the prime of life. At least one answer to this may not be very comforting but it is the truth. God doesn’t promise that following faithfully will be easy. Anyone who tells you following God is easy is lying to you. Being God’s witness may very well produce suffering. Paul says this is God’s doing too:

“For God has graciously granted you the privilege
not only of believing in Christ,
but of suffering for him as well—
since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had
and now hear that I still have.”

How then do we cope when we are deluged by uncertainty and our self worth is being battered? There must be more than just mere platitudes to address my heart’s pain.

Suppose you were exploring an unknown glacier in the north of Greenland in the dead of winter. Just as you reach a sheer cliff with a spectacular view of miles and miles of jagged ice- and snow-covered mountains, a terrible storm breaks in. The wind is so strong that the fear arises that it might blow you and your party right over the cliff. But during it you discover a cleft in the ice where you can hide. Here you feel secure, but the awesome might of the storm rages on and you watch it with a kind of trembling pleasure as it surges out across the distant glaciers.

At first, there was the fear that this terrible storm and awesome terrain might claim your life. But then you found a refuge and gained the hope that you would be safe. But not everything in the feeling called fear vanished. Only the life-threatening part. There remains the trembling, the awe, the wonder, the feeling that you would never want to tangle with such a storm or be the adversary of such a power.

God’s power is behind the unendurable cold of Arctic storms. Yet he cups his hand around us and says, “Take refuge in my love and let the terrors of my power become the awesome fireworks of your happy night sky.”

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We are struggling human beings. We do not have all the answers. Why should we be any different from St. Paul who admitted his own struggles. We are not called to know everything or be everything. It is enough to be who we are, the special child God created us to be. It is enough to believe and follow the Lord Jesus and to allow our selves to be used to glorify God. Be glad you are not a fish or a toad or a clam or a ham, but the person God made you to be. "Who am I?" I am God's Child. "Why am I here?" To be just who I am. Amen.