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The Search for Meaning

Imagine someone who has dreamed for years of a Caribbean vacation. She saw the pictures in the travel magazines – white sand beaches, turquoise ocean, a beach chair with a cold drink on a table – and she wants *that*. She works hard, saves money, sacrifices other things, and finally she arrives at the perfect beach, just like in the picture. She has the right clothes, the right hat, a drink, a chair, and a book, and she sits down to enjoy her dream. What happens? Ten minutes later, she's bored. It's hot, she starts to sweat, and she can feel the sun burning through the lotion. All those years dreaming of this moment, and now . . . meh. Do you recognize that feeling? When the moment itself doesn't compare to the *idea* that you'd had of the moment.

A lot of adults, when they reach their middle years, feel that way about life. For decades they've followed the American Dream: financial security, a nice home with a two-car garage and a neat lawn in a safe neighborhood, career and professional success, and a plan for retirement. Finally, in their 50s say, they achieve all that and . . . it's not what they'd expected. They don't *feel* like they've made it. The more they acquire, the more time and energy has to go into maintaining it. The more money they set aside, the more they worry about losing it. By all the standards they started with, they have *arrived*, and now they aren't sure it's worth being there. So what can they do? Some suppress those stirrings of discontent. *I worked my whole life to get here! I WILL be happy!* Others wonder if maybe what they need is a *bigger* house and even *more* money in the bank, and so they keep going. Still others buy sports cars, get plastic surgery, dump their spouses for newer models, and all that we sometimes call "mid-life crisis." Some give up; they burn out in their jobs, check out of their families, or just drink a lot. A few, though, step back and wonder, *What if I've been looking in the wrong places? What if meaning is somewhere else?*

These are the people I want to talk about today, middle-aged people who realize that the goals of their youth have not brought them what they sought, and who are willing to look for meaning elsewhere. But I have to admit up front that not every middle-aged adult has this experience. Most don't, in fact. Middle-aged migrant workers or refugees or subsistence farmers or sweatshop workers or oppressed minorities anywhere don't have energy for such angst. This sort of mid-life search for meaning is a luxury available only to affluent people – you know, like most of us. But even if it isn't universal, it is real, and it is important. And we find it in the Bible.

The Gospel for Adults Ecclesiastes 6:1-6; 8:16-17

We read from the Book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 6, verses 1-6:

6 There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy upon humankind: ²those to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that they lack nothing of all that they desire, yet God does not enable them to enjoy these things, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous ill. ³A man may beget a hundred children, and live for many years; but however many are the days of his years, if he does not enjoy life's good things, or has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. ⁴For it comes into vanity and goes into

darkness, and in darkness its name is covered; ⁵moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything; yet it finds rest rather than he. ⁶Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good—do not all go to one place? .

Then from chapter 8, verses 16-17:

¹⁶When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one's eyes see sleep neither day nor night, ¹⁷then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.

Let me introduce you to one of my favorite biblical voices: Qoheleth, the bitter man behind the book of Ecclesiastes. We don't know his name. He calls himself Qoheleth, which just means "one who gathers the community." English Bibles usually translate that "the Preacher." Because Qoheleth also describes himself as a king in Jerusalem who was very rich and wise, tradition identifies him with Solomon. Many scholars doubt that, but I don't really care. What matters is that the author of this book was a discouraged, cynical man who had concluded that life was empty. "Meaninglessness upon meaninglessness. Everything's meaningless," the book begins. Nothing is new. And nothing matters. Qoheleth describes his own search for meaning: he tried wealth, he tried pleasure, he tried wisdom. He concludes that they're all empty. The richer and more pampered you get, the less content you are. The wiser you become, the more aware you are of the pointlessness of your existence. Everything's useless, and then you die.

You don't believe this is in the Bible? Read it. You want to know what it's like to face life from the pit of depression? Read it. You want to know what it's like to have everything you could ask for except a reason to get up in the morning? Read this book. And then thank God it's in our Bible, affirming that this experience is valid, too. Here's one way that the Bible is different from the average church: the Bible never pretends everything is all right. The Bible never pretends anything. In any case, this book perfectly captures that sense of despair that I described earlier, that often appears in middle-age, the despair that can come when you've achieved all your goals and found them all empty.

In 2014, a sociologist named Josh Packard published the results of a multi-year study he had done in a book called *Church Refugees*. Packard had heard about all the people leaving church and – a Christian himself – he set out to discover why. Packard wasn't interested in people who had never been very involved and eventually faded away altogether; he limited his study to people who had been *active* in church at one time. He expected to find that it was mostly young adults, and that it would often be the result of some specific disappointment – the pastor who has an affair, or something. He was wrong. What he found mostly were middle-aged adults who had served on every committee, been pillars of the church, and who had not left in anger but rather with deep grief. Why? Why had they left? Because they had begun looking for deeper meaning in their lives, something beyond surface success, and they hadn't found it in the church. Instead they found churches obsessed with the American Dream, church edition. Packard tells of one woman who wanted to start a new after-school program for neighborhood children in her church, which was a perfect location. Her church leaders said no; they didn't see how it would increase their membership. Or another woman who had an idea for a home-help ministry for seniors, but the idea got shuffled around for years and finally got lost between church committees. These middle-aged adults were looking for meaningful engagement with the world,

but they found institutional ambition. They were looking for ways to make a difference to someone, and they found bureaucracy. They were looking for deep conversations about things that matter, and they got tithing sermons. They were looking for a reason – *Any reason!* – to seek that meaning through the church of Jesus Christ, and they found ... squat. So they left. Maybe you know some of these church refugees. Maybe you're hanging on by your fingernails yourself.

So if our task as a church is to preach the gospel of Christ – the good news that Christ offers to all people – what would be the gospel to people like this, people who had found life meaningless and were seeking that meaning anew? Maybe something like this: *True meaning is found in the Christ who gave up everything to show his love for others. Come, look for that meaning with us, because only by giving our lives away will we truly live.*

But there's a challenge there, too, for us in the church. If we're going to proclaim that gospel, we have to live it. As a church, we actually have to be meaningful. We have to be a place that never forgets that our purpose is to make disciples and transform the world. Everything that we do that leads directly to those purposes must come first. This means worship, faith formation, community service, prayer, and ministry to the weak have to be first. Everything else that we do – fellowships, building maintenance, fundraising – is secondary and only important if it supports our real purpose. People who are looking for meaning can tell the difference between a congregation made up of followers of Christ and a congregation made up of passive religion consumers.

And, not to put too fine a point on it, our denomination, with the best of good intentions, makes this harder than it should be. We specialize in bureaucracy and rules. Every rule has a good purpose, but when you put all the rules together you end up with a maze of inefficiency. For instance, if churches follow the United Methodist guidelines for committees exactly, they can end up with every able-bodied member on an administrative committee and no one left for, you know, ministry. The message that sends is: "Our core value is self-maintenance," and the person looking for a meaningful engagement with the world is not going to stay long in a church with that priority. I wouldn't. You know how, in news reports about Congress, you'll sometimes hear that some bill "died in committee"? Someday that might serve as the epitaph for the United Methodist Church: "She died in committee." But that doesn't change anything for us in this local congregation, except that it means we have to be more intentional about our real purpose and more determined to live it out.

When I read Packard's book, I found myself and my own struggles in it, and I had to ask, "If I weren't a pastor, paid to be in church every Sunday, would I be one of those refugees?" In fact, I went to a conference that year to hear Packard speak, and in the discussion afterwards several clergy persons from different denominations said bluntly that they couldn't wait until they retired so that they could flee church, too. I decided I didn't want to be like those burned out clergy. But, like other middle-aged followers of Christ, I have realized that I don't have as much time as I used to think, certainly not enough to waste on helping the church spin its wheels in the ruts. And in the end, I really believe in the church's potential to change the world. It will always be uphill, a struggle against adverse forces outside the church and inertia inside, but everything worth doing is hard. If we are to proclaim a gospel of meaning, the good news that there is more to life than "everything's useless, and then you die," it will be worth the effort.

Let's pray.

God, the world is too much with us, late and soon.

We have too easily accepted the wisdom of this world:

That having more will make us happy, that doing more will make us important.

We have fed our egos with the junk foods of beauty and wealth and fame,

And now we find ourselves still hungry.

Forgive us, God, that – once again – we only turn to you when we've tried everything else.

But we *have* tried everything else. And nothing has satisfied us.

So show us meaning. Give us joy in our food and drink, fulfillment in our toil, and peace in our trouble,

Point us in a new direction, and give us new purpose.

So that we may indeed leave a footprint on this earth when we are gone,

And that the footprint will be yours. Amen.