

Seventh Sunday of Easter
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX.
24 May 2020

John 17:1-11

There is a moment in the life of every performer that is both terrifying and exciting at the same time. It is the moment when the stage or production manager comes into the dressing room and says "It's time." This call marks the time to go on stage, film a scene, give a speech, perform the great act for which you have been preparing for a long time. At that moment, the performer must face all fears, all doubts, all misgivings. Everything that has happened in the person's life before has pointed to this moment. Everything that will follow in the person's life may be deeply affected by this experience. This is a crucial moment.

Now, imagine that the expression "it's time" marks the end of your life. Imagine that you are about to die any second, and you are given an opportunity to say a few last words, reflect on the meaning and purpose of your life, impart some parting words of wisdom. What would you say? This is an important question because in many ways it points to that other awesome question: "What is the meaning and the purpose of life?" This is the question of questions, this one is the Holy Grail of all inquiries. We all want to know why we are here, what this is all about, the reason why we are born. We are all looking for purpose.

Before we talk about how Jesus answers this question, let me briefly review two of the most common answers to this question during Jesus' day. One day while Jesus was talking to his disciples he said to them "Beware if the yeast of the Sadducees and the Pharisees." Each one of these two groups represents an answer to the question, "What is the purpose of life." The Sadducee does not believe in the resurrection, in angels, in spirits, in a hereafter, in eternal justice, in heaven or in hell. For the Sadducee this world is all there is. Plain and simple. So, for the Sadducee, the purpose of this life is to master the material world, to dominate the environment, to analyze it, study it, conquer it, and benefit from it.

The Sadducee, in other words, represents many of us who work hard at finding the meaning of life in science and technology, in the power of raw economics, in the eternal quest for self-fulfillment, and in psychology. Many who attempt to find meaning by these means believe God, if he exists at all, is irrelevant to the human quest for self-improvement. Ayn Rand, the idol and patron saint of American secularism, for example, believes there is no need for God in order to

live a moral life. She believes that we are capable of rational self-interest. The rationality of which she speaks and writes will create market dynamics and rules that will ensure the survival of the whole, the happiness of those seeking their self-interest, and, eventually, the betterment of humanity and civilization.

For this view of life, we become center and object. Humanity is pure and beautiful, capable of self-guidance and self-control. This is the spirit behind humanism. What this view forgets is the incredible potential for evil in the human heart. The tremendous potential for envy, hatred, greed, fraud, and abuse. If we have potential to self-regulate why have we had some of the worse recessions in history over the last 12 to 15 years? Why do we have to deal with Wall Street corruption? Why do we have some of the highest levels of homelessness this country has ever seen. If this view is correct and we are basically good, and we are to find the purpose of life through science, technology, and psychology why do we have the highest rates of suicide in the world?

The Second answer to the problem comes from the yeast of the Pharisee. This yeast is the yeast of self-righteousness. It is the yeast of human pride that believes we have the key to salvation and know the combination to the locked doors of heaven. The Pharisees believe in God, they are religious, they believe in heaven and they believe in hell. They know there will be a judgement at the end of days, they know there will be rewards and punishments in paradise. They love and fear God and they want to do their best to please him. What is the problem then? The Pharisees believe that humans are born free and able to produce behavior that is acceptable to God. Humans don't need a sacrifice on the cross, the death of the Son of God, the blood of Calvary. They can produce enough good behaviors to please God and earn their own salvation. In this view Jesus is no longer a sacrifice for sin, but an example of Godly living and a model of what we too can one day be.

The Pharisee of today is the arrogant self-righteous religious person who believes salvation is a matter of obeying rules, a matter of saying the right prayers, and a matter of performing the right rituals. Because the Pharisee of today sees himself or herself as more religious than others, he or she tends to act in tremendously intolerant ways towards others who don't practice as he practices. They have the truth, no body else has the truth, and because of this, they are more righteous. It is this type of yeast that allows us to hide behind fanaticism, behind many tele-evangelists who delight in telling people what to do, behind terrorists of various persuasions. They and they alone will have the combination key to the doors of heaven, and they can save themselves through their good behaviors.

In today's Gospel Jesus prays his "High Priestly" prayer for his disciples, and at some point in his prayer he says, "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." There it is! This is the secret. Pay attention, I will read it one more time. If anyone would ask Jesus what the purpose of life is, he would say, "To know God, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom He has sent." This is the purpose of life. To rely absolutely on God and to realize that we are dependent on him, we are his creatures. The purpose of life is to know God, to know his love, to know his provision, to discern his ways, to be faithful to his design, to draw from him, and to trust in him.

The purpose of life is also to know Christ, to accept his free sacrifice on the cross, to realize that because we can not save ourselves we need someone to save us, and that someone is God's own Son. To know Christ is to realize that our good works have absolutely no value in securing our salvation. Our good works are the result of our salvation, the result of our faith, and not the cause of it. because of that we can not be arrogant. We can not be self-righteous. We can not be fanatical, thinking that we and we alone have the truth. To know Christ is to know that this whole enterprise we call life is really not about me, but about Christ. When you try to earn your salvation by your own means you will always end up depressed, filled with anxiety and shame, exhausted, and joyless. The Pharisee who attempts to save himself tends to become hypocritical, appearing to be so holy on the surface, and yet trying very hard to cover his own sinfulness and his own arrogance.

So, there it goes. I just gave you the purpose of life, and you didn't have to pay \$15 dollars for a book. Beware of the arrogance of the Sadducees who have replaced God with science and technology. Ultimately they will fail. Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees who believe they can speak to God eye to eye and demand their rights because they are morally superior to anyone. Ultimately they too will fail. The purpose of life is to know God and to humbly accept what Christ, his son, has done for us on the cross. Everything else is a fallacy and a lie.

Let us pray

Dear God we give you thanks that a purposeful life is a life filled with your love and your protection. We give you thanks for sending Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life. Help us to know him more and more every day and to fall in love with him, so that we may lead others to him through the depth of our love and the quality of our life. In Jesus name we pray, Amen!