

The Practice of Purpose

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Texts: Romans 12:9-21
Exodus 3:1-15

October 23, 2011

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Exodus 3:1-15

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the LORD said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' He said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.'

But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you." ' God also said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you":

This is my name for ever,
and this my title for all generations.

“What do you want to be when you grow up? ” This was the question my wife Sarah asked her middle school class. After taking some time to think, several hands went up in her small circle of students. The first student said, “I want to be a police officer so I can keep my neighborhood safe.” Another student said, “I want to be a music producer because I love listening to music.” After nearly all the students had spoken, one student was still deep in thought with his hand perched right under his chin. Eventually, Sarah asked the student, “Well, have you decided what you want to be when you grow up? ” Slowly nodding his head, he said, “Yes, I think I have. I want to be a pastor, so I only have to work on Sundays.”

Since I have become a pastor, I do work on Sundays, and other days as well. When I was younger I also thought I would be working on Sundays that is because I wanted to become a professional football player. In case my stature might lead you to question otherwise, I was a kicker. So it was not size, but speed that mattered. Practicing for the purpose that I had in life, as an athlete, was a year-round job. The fall was football games, the winter was strength and conditioning practice, the spring was training season; the summer was kicking camps and preseason. I was convinced that I was going to be a professional football player.

Yet, I came to realize after chasing my dream that it wasn't meant to be. I began a process of seeking and searching that led me to my purpose as a pastor. I still work on Sundays, and my teammates look different, the playing field is now about serving instead of scoring, but one thing is still the same, success in the game of faith and ministry is still about practice.

Is what you're doing now what you thought you would become? What you thought you wanted to be in life, may or may not be what you end up doing. Some of us may have become what we thought about since we were young. Others of us may find that we are doing something we discovered later on. And still, even at fifty or sixty, you may be thinking now about what it is you want to be when you grow up. Where ever we are, what we do as our job or profession, is only part of how we live out our purpose in life.

It is probably safe to say that Moses did not plan on leading the people of Israel out of Egypt when he grew up. As we meet Moses in our text, he is a shepherd for his father-in-law Jethro. As it can happen in life, Moses' purpose was about to change. As it can for people, Moses initially missed his purpose.

Why did Moses miss his purpose? All the pieces were in place for a straightforward calling by God to Moses' new purpose. Here are the top 3 reasons why Moses realizing his purpose should have been clearer:

Reason number 1: He was on Horeb, the mountain of God. You can't get much better reception than that for hearing God's message. If Moses' had a smart phone, his connection to God would have been crystal clear.

Reason number 2: Moses saw a burning bush that was not consumed. That's not something you see every day!

And reason number 3: God actually spoke to Moses. Enough said.

Moses heard that God called him, but he missed his purpose. Moses says, "Who am I that I should go?" In the next chapter of Exodus, Moses goes as far to say, "Please send someone else!" Moses' reaction to his purpose from God was unimpressive. Our scripture speaks to how challenging it can be to understand a message of purpose, even when it seems obvious.

It was the first week of classes, which can often be a hectic time for a college student. Getting the right books, finding the right buildings, making it to class on time. As a college senior I lived in Christian community at the Presbyterian University Center, and we each had chores.

I volunteered to be in charge of keeping up the kitchen; wiping the counters, sweeping the floor and unloading the dishwasher. Of each of these tasks, I least enjoyed unloading the dishwasher. Even while living in Christian community, I found little joy in doing this chore. Though it may not have always been done joyfully, I fulfilled my purpose as “keeper of the kitchen.”

After my first day of classes, I came back to the Center in the afternoon, feeling tired. When I walked into the kitchen, I saw a yellow sticky note was placed on the front of the dishwasher. Looking closer, I read the word CLEAN underlined, in all capital letters, with an exclamation point! Was one of my community peers pointing out that it was time for me to do my chore? Well, it certainly looked like it! Now, I'm not a person who is easily upset, but I was then. I swung open the dishwasher, lined up the glasses, stacked the plates, and divided the silverware, making sure that anyone within an earshot could hear what I was doing. After a hectic day, I was not ready to be told I needed to do my chore!

A while later, I was cooling off on the couch and one of my housemates walked in. I was ready to tell her exactly what was on my mind. Before I could get a word out she said, “Hey, did you see that I left a note on the dishwasher letting you know that the dishes were clean? I just didn't want anyone to put any dirty dishes in there before you emptied it out.” In an

instant, my balloon of self-pity was deflated. I had completely missed the purpose of the message. What I thought was a nagging note, was actually intended to be a helpful one. There I was, living in a community of faith, and yet I did not recognize this message about my chore and this was not even a message from God!

The yellow sticky note message on the dishwasher is not in the same category as meeting God on a mountaintop, though once our oven did nearly burst into flames. The truth is that it can be challenging to understand the purpose of an ordinary message, not to mention a call from God. Have you ever missed a message? How you ever felt that you missed something God was trying to communicate to you?

As a person of faith, God calls you to your purpose in life through a sense of what we call vocation. Vocation is one of those church doctrines that we usually think of as what we do for our job or profession, which is true. However, vocation also speaks to how we order and live out our lives, how we practice our purpose. In a book on vocation, author Douglas Schuurman reflects on the doctrine of vocation. He suggests that it is the “church's task to evoke and sustain a sense for all of life as an integrated response to God's calling.”

The call of Moses in our scripture passage speaks to this kind of “integrated response to God's calling.” God called Moses not just to his role as a leader of the people, but to his life's purpose.

Though understanding God's purpose for our lives is sometimes more clear than others, God's presence remains constant. God was fully present throughout the call of Moses. The text says that “the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.” This detail signals the presence of a God who was intimately involved in Moses' call. In the fire, the light of God was present. The burning bush was a sign of God's light and presence, which would stay with him. God said to Moses, “I will be with you.”

Though he initially missed his purpose, Moses did respond to God's call. When the Lord called, Moses spoke to the voice he heard from the burning bush, saying, “Here I am.” And his response to that purpose, became his practice, how he lived out his faith. From this response and through a process, God guided Moses to his purpose. Moses went from being a shepherd of sheep, to a shepherd of people.

The name Moses means, “the one who was drawn out, ” speaking to his being drawn out of the water as an infant by Pharaoh's daughter. Like Moses, we each have a particular purpose inside us, that can be drawn out. Just as God guided Moses to his purpose, God calls you to your life's

purpose. God calls you not just to your job or profession, but to the purpose found in each day.

There is a modern day parable that communicates what our purpose can mean when it is understood as a daily practice. There was once a traveler who journeyed all over the globe in search of wisdom and enlightenment. In the midst of one village, he came upon a great deal of noise, dust, and commotion. He approached the nearest laborer and asked, "Excuse me; I'm not from this village. May I ask what your purpose is here?" The laborer replied curtly, "Can't you see? I'm busting rocks."

The traveler approached a second laborer doing the same thing and asked the same question. "Can't you see? I'm earning a living to support my family."

The traveler then approached a third laborer who was also breaking up rocks and posed the question a final time. With a broad smile and gleam in his eye, the third laborer replied with great pride: "Can't you see? We're building a cathedral."

Seeing our purpose in life as something we put into practice each day is vital to a life of faith. Understanding our call from God can become a valuable part of our vocation, our purpose in life. Everyday our call from God invites a response.

One of the ways we respond to God's call to realize our purpose is through prayer and meditation. I like to think of prayer as talking to God and meditation and listening for God. When you pray, you speak to God about what is on your heart and mind. When you meditate, you allow God to speak into your life. A healthy spiritual life includes both talking to and listening for God. It is similar to having balanced communication in any relationship. Think about a close relationship, either with a spouse, child, parent, or friend. Would it be a very healthy relationship if you did all the talking or if you only listened?

When you practice prayer and meditation, you can be better attuned to your purpose and help others hear their own call from God. In prayer you can ask: God, what purpose are you calling me to today or in my life? In meditation, you can listen for God to answer. We find our purpose through a process. Purpose is not found in a day, but it is found daily.

No matter what you do in life, or how many times that changes, your greatest purpose is to reflect God's light in the world. Your life is a light in the world because God's light shines through you, even in the darkness. When the world is dark, when there is no burning bush nearby, you have the light of God to illuminate your path, because it is within you that God's light and love is revealed for others.

How do you know when you are practicing your purpose? When you offer an encouraging word to a frustrated stranger. That's the practice of purpose! When you help a needy neighbor to repair their roof. That's the practice of purpose! When you read a story to a child. That's the practice of purpose! When you give time to tutor an at-risk youth. That's the practice of purpose! When you visit an older adult who is homebound. That is the practice of purpose!

God called Moses to his life's purpose and through a process, Moses responded to God's call. Though the story of Moses' call is ancient, today God calls us to our purpose in the present. For in the end, your purpose is God's purpose. Just as Moses responded to God, may we do likewise saying, "Here I am." Amen.