

LOSING PURPOSE AND FINDING IT NEW

Luke 24: 13-48

Do you have a purpose in life? Is it clear in your mind? Are you passionate about it?... Maybe you're in a time of transition right now where your life purpose is in flux. Maybe your purpose has changed over the years. Maybe change has been forced on you and you're having a hard time accepting it. Maybe you're trying to figure out what comes next. Maybe you have some anxiety as to whether you'll find your purpose again in the same way you've had it before. Maybe...

The disciples of Jesus thought they had a purpose. And they thought their purpose was clear. Jesus had drawn them from that they had been doing before. He had inspired them with a new purpose, a larger purpose to which they could devote their passion and energy. "Follow me and I will teach you how to fish for people, not just fish."

Once they started following Jesus, they witnessed a whole movement growing around him. There was talk of Jesus being the new messiah, the one people had been hoping and praying for. Everyone knew what the messiah had to do. He would unite the people around himself. He would organize a revolution that would lead to a new liberation from slavery to the new Egypt which was Rome. He would inaugurate a new and glorious kingdom and the whole world would look to Israel for guidance and leadership toward a new age of power, prosperity and peace.

But how would such a revolution be won? Rome was not going to give up power without a fight. Many Israelites would not just unite around a messiah unless he was able to inspire submission and obedience through military and political strength. The disciples of Jesus would also, then, reap the rewards of backing the right leader. Jesus' power would mean their power. Jesus rule would mean their security and wealth. Their purpose was clear, and they were getting really passionate about it. Wouldn't anyone?

But there were also signs, signs they didn't want to see, signs that the purpose wasn't as clear as they hoped it was. Jesus did a lot of healing. He was gifted. He also had a lot of compassion in him, sometimes too much. You have to make some distinction between good and bad people. You have to put the screws of guilt and threat of punishment on the bad ones, no? How else do you get them to change their ways and fall into line. God would not bless the people if there were bad apples in the mix. 'Get into line or else you'll be cut off.' That's what the religious authorities taught. But somehow, Jesus wasn't going along with that approach. He taught that good people needed lots of love, but bad ones needed it even more of it. That's the way there's hope of changing bad into good, by loving them enough to change them, not by condemning them and punishing the bad out of them. That only creates an us and them society which mirrors the rest of the world. How can Israel

really become a different society, a kingdom truly ruled by a God who was overflowing love? How could Israel be a true light to other nations if they were just like other nations?

The disciples weren't quite getting that part of it. No matter. Things would work out. Well, things didn't work out. At least not according to the purpose the disciples held dear. Jesus was not only rejected by the people with the power. He was killed and killed as a treasonous blasphemer. It wasn't enough just to get rid of Jesus. They had to crush the movement he had started. By killing him in the worst, most painful and humiliating way possible, his movement would fall apart fast. That's what they thought would happen.

And that's what Jesus' disciples thought happened. Given their expectations of a glorious kingdom with Jesus as king, we can imagine how devastated they were when they witnessed Jesus horrible demise. Yes, he said all kinds of things about the fact that he would meet fierce opposition and death, but that was just silly talk out of panic, no? If he was the messiah things had to work out in the end. But they didn't. Jesus was dead, dead, dead, and all the hopes and dreams they had, all the purpose that had driven them the past few years... it all fell apart.

Have you ever felt devastated in your hopes and dreams, disillusioned, totally let down? Have you ever lost your passion and purpose? Have you ever felt swallowed up in grief or confusion or the shock of the unexpected? You've lost your way, you're feeling so numb you cannot feel much of anything but despair and hopelessness. How can anything good rise up again?

Here's where we meet the disciples in our gospel reading this morning. While a whole group of them were still in Jerusalem, hiding, the two in our gospel reading have left Jerusalem. Jesus is dead, and the movement is dead. There is no future in any of it. And so, they're leaving. But as they're making the journey walking and talking about all this, they meet a stranger. He seems to be going the same direction. We're told who the stranger is, but they don't know. Don't they recognize it's Jesus? How could they? Whatever this fellow looked like he can't be the same person who was a mutilated corpse on the cross a few days ago.

And so, were told, their eyes were kept from recognizing him. He asks them what they're talking about. What else would they be talking about? "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?... about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." Clearly, Jesus' death was the end of their hopes for Israel's redemption.

But there's something else too. Evidently, some of their group were claiming that Jesus' body went missing from the tomb. What could that mean? The women of their group claimed angels told them Jesus was alive. How could that be possible? And here's where it gets really fascinating. Jesus zeros in on where the real issue is. There's no way they'll recognize Jesus and understand their purpose in following him unless they understand how his death actually fulfills the kind of redemption he's

come to bring. His death was a terrible event. Absolutely. But God can use even a terrible event to bring about an even greater purpose. How?

Because if it is love and peace rather than power and might that will save Israel and the world, you choose to suffer a cross rather than use a sword to achieve your purposes. If you want to bring about a redemption that achieves reconciliation between people, you must inspire forgiveness rather than fuel animosity and hate. If you want to bring people together rather than polarize them further, you deal with injustice by embracing the victims, shining a light on their oppression, but then showing them how to get power back by forgiving their enemies rather than seeking to destroy them.

The cross achieves this like nothing else could, and so it becomes the centerpiece of the plan. In a world of hate, injustice and us versus them, only the power of crucified love can open doors and build bridges. That's God's plan. To follow Jesus is to embrace this plan and to build a life purpose on it – to become bridge builders, door openers, peace-makers, standing with all victims, empowering them to protest abuse and injustice. But also empowering them to forgive in order to build bridges rather than larger prisons of revenge, hate, bitterness and despair. That's what Jesus does with outstretched arms on the cross. He embraces rather than rejects and condemns. That's what these disciples had to understand in order to recognize the risen Christ. The resurrection means that love wins, not power or force or violence or manipulation for personal gain. Love wins even if it is crushed. It rises again and again and becomes more creative in building bridges of connection, even between enemies.

Ok, preacher. This happened 2000 years ago. That's a long time ago. Where are signs today of the kind of redemption Christ came to fulfill? In a time of global volatility, an us versus them social climate... a time of mistrust, conflict, tension and resentment toward those who demand something of us... how do we serve Christ's agenda by being agents of a different kingdom influencing a different environment around us?

Let me end with a story. Beaver Creek is a prison up in Gravenhurst, Ontario. Many of the inmates are there preparing for eventual release into society. Many have been in prison for a long time. Many have committed violent crimes including murder. Many struggle with mental health challenges, childhood abuse, various addictions, various kinds of trauma and depression. Many have attempted suicide multiple times. But some have also enrolled in a new program. The program offers an opportunity for inmates to study acting and perform in a theatre production. The idea is that creative expression can humanize people. Creative expression can help them get in touch with their feelings, even their darkest feelings, and this can be life-giving.

The director of the program is Jill Kooymans. She's just 25 years old. Her experience with theatre helped her through her own struggles with depression. Her theory is that theatre, like other arts, can help inmates deal with their struggles too. Whether it's anger, frustration, depression, grief, guilt or despair, theatre can help people engage their feelings in a richer way than just repressing them or expressing them in destructive ways. In Kooyman's own words: "who would you rather come back

into your community: somebody who's been sitting behind bars doing nothing, building up resentment towards the system that put them there all those years, carrying shame, anger, depression and grief... or someone who's had an opportunity to make themselves a better person?"

Of course, you have to believe that people can change. You have to believe that creative effort can do amazing things. You have to believe that love can rise up again and open new doors. But you have to believe in forgiving as well as repenting. Those involved in this program don't question why they're in prison and how bad it is what they've done. But they're also hurting inside and carrying lots of shame and self-loathing. They are hungry for some human connection that believes good things are possible.

Their first play is called "7 Stories." The main character is a man who spends the length of the play on a building ledge contemplating suicide. The actor who plays this man is Marcello Palma. In real life, Palma is in prison for murdering three prostitutes in downtown Toronto in 1996. His lawyer at the time argued that Palma was not criminally responsible for the murders for psychiatric reasons. But he was imprisoned just the same. When asked about life in prison and how the public sees him, Palma gets emotional. "There's just so much to that," he says, eyes watering. "I guess what I want to say is there is hope. People can change." But the question is, do we believe that? Do we care? Or are we so angry and bitter that we say: 'too bad.'

It's opening night. Hundreds of prisoners are ushered in to their seats in the gymnasium turned theatre. The curtains open. There are cheers and laughter. Palma is on a make-shift building ledge. He begins with these words: "My mind could expand into infinite space, and still never change the shape of my head. I saw in the mirror a condemned man, serving a life sentence inside his body."... Wow. Total silence from the audience. This audience and really relate to these words. Maybe there is hope for change. But you must risk going to the cross to reach it. Maybe there is a larger purpose. But you must open your heart and expand your love to find it... Jesus is calling you to follow him just as he was calling those first disciples. They lost their purpose only to find a richer, worthier one. How will you find your purpose at this time of your life? How will the risen Christ's reconciling love inspire you to open some doors in your life and your relationships?

Let us pray: Renew our purpose, O God... enrich it with your love and inspire it with fresh faith and hope in what you can do in us and through us... Amen.