

THE PURPOSE OF LIFE, THE PURPOSE OF CHURCH

Exodus 34: 29-35; Luke 9: 28-36

Sam looked like he was someone in constant demand. Every time he came to church with his spouse and kids, I found him distracted, on his phone, stepping out of worship and sometimes even interrupting our conversation to check an email or text that had come in. Sam was busy. And even when he offered to help with something, I was constantly aware that his time was precious. He couldn't just hang around making idle conversation or small talk. If there was a job to do he was prepared to do it and move on. It was all about efficiency. Hanging around was idleness, a waste of time, and there was always something that had to be done and places he needed to be.

I wasn't surprised when I heard a few years later that Sam's marriage had collapsed. He had left his family to go work in the U.S., rarely remembering to call his kids or mark important dates in their lives. But Sam was ascending the corporate ladder. He was important and therefore busy. Wasn't that the purpose of life? Being busy is what measures your significance. Being in demand 24/7 is what measures how much you matter. And yet, what had Sam missed in this equation?

On the other end of life there was Dirk. Dirk had recently retired and had come to church to check it out after a lifetime where there was no time for church. Dirk was lonely and restless. He didn't know what to do with himself and was looking for volunteer jobs. He had always been busy and in demand throughout his life. Now, it seemed, he had been forgotten. He had lost his purpose. If he didn't find something to do, something to occupy his time, he would fall into a depression. I always felt we couldn't come up with enough things for Dirk to do. Eventually, he left the church and I expect he tried to find some other organization where he could be far more busy with volunteer jobs. I hope he found his purpose.

Finally there was Sheila. One of the precious things about my former congregation is that we had non-profit housing attached to the church. And many of the residents were people with severe physical disabilities requiring them not only to have motorized chairs, but lots of help throughout their days in order to live independently. Sheila was one such resident. She was born with spina bifida and had no use of her legs and limited use of her arms. Sheila depended on care workers to get her up, wash her, toilet her, make meals for her and then do what needed to be done at the end of the day to get her into bed.

I learned a lot from Sheila. And one of the big learnings had to do with the whole idea of busyness and the purpose of life. Sheila had a lot of time on her hands. She also had

to do a lot of waiting in her day. She had to be patient because she was so dependent. With all her time, however, Sheila also noticed things, a lot of things I totally missed as I walked back and forth through the church halls, the office, in and out of the building. Sheila would notice every little thing, from the particular flowers outside, the trees and what changes she witnessed daily. She would notice every crook and cranny in our hallways. She would hang around to chat and check in. I had to learn to slow down, to listen and to engage in conversation with Sheila; nothing in particular, just being present; being there, not somewhere else; no emails to check, no texts to respond to, no other calls to pick up; just learning to be present, to make time and space in my day.

What did Sheila have to teach me about life's purpose?

If we followed the example of Sam and Dirk, life's purpose is about being busy. Being busy is being successful, being important, being significant. A church has to be busy with many programs. A minister has to have stuff to do not just on Sundays or with a few meetings here and there. Ministers have to go places, talk to people with a goal in mind, check on them, organize things, do things... Ministers who are idle or just coast along, and a church with few programs... well, such ministers, such churches, like such people in general, have lost their purpose, their importance, their significance... We have to follow the corporate model to succeed, no? That means being busy!

Well, but then there's Sheila. What alternative vision of purpose, importance and significance could she offer? Let's dive into our scripture readings in search of an alternative to busyness!

Our Old Testament reading is an account of Moses, the great leader of the people, descending a mountain he has been on for a long time. 40 days and 40 nights, in fact. That's a long time. The biblical number "40" also means it was a time of struggle and discernment. Moses needed the time to figure things out, to listen for the voice of God and to open his heart to see with his spirit, not just his eyes... What did Moses see? What did he hear? What did he feel? We're told that he came down with two tablets. What was chiselled on the tablets would be the basis of a covenant between God and the people.

Also, we're told that Moses experienced such intimacy with God that the skin of his face shone. The light of God was so bright that it lit Moses up. The people were taken aback. They were awed. So that they didn't confuse Moses with the very presence of God, Moses covered his face. He was simply the mouthpiece of God, not God. The people had to worship God, not Moses.

Once we get to our gospel reading, however, we see something quite different. Clearly the story in our gospel is patterned after the story of Moses. Jesus, too, is on a mountain

and he brings a few of his closest disciples with him. Like Moses, Jesus, too is lit up. But in Jesus' case, it is not the light of God that lights him up. He, himself, is the light of God. And it is not just his face that lights up but all of him. All of Jesus is God. And rather than receiving tablets of stone that have the words of God chiselled on them, Jesus himself is the voice of God. And in case anyone present has any doubts, they hear a voice which declares: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When you've got Jesus, you don't need tablets of stone!

OK, was this real? Was it a dream? Well, what's real? What's real is whether you and I believe that Jesus is the voice of God. We follow Jesus because we believe Jesus is the light of God. Jesus gives us the picture of God and the window into the creator's very heart. If we buy into this vision we have faith. If we live by such faith we have hope. If we commit to such faith and live by such hope in our values and our relationships, we have Jesus' love in us.

The disciples present on that mountain all have the same dream. They also witness the presence of figures who look like Moses the great leader and Elijah the great prophet. Their presence gives further authority to Jesus being the voice of God in the flesh.

OK, but there's something more we may learn from Moses and Jesus on the mountain. Moses takes time to be present. Moses takes time to listen, to discern, to see more deeply than what is on the surface. Jesus' disciples must also take the time to stop and pay attention, to listen, to discern and to see more deeply than what is on the surface. They will never see Jesus the same again.

There's a word for what Moses and Jesus' disciples experience. The word is: resonance. What's resonance? Usually we associate the word resonance with music. When a sound is resonant it is rich and deep rather than thin and tinny. It's the same with an experience. When we say something resonates it means it connects deeply with our experience.

Now think of how we would apply the word resonance to life and life's purpose. To help us do that, I'd like to cite the work of a German philosopher and sociologist named Harmut Rosa. In 2010, Rosa published an important book which highlights the importance of resonance as an alternative to efficiency and busyness. Resonance is not just about taking the time to notice something. Resonance means that you allow something to affect you so deeply it transforms you. Imagine if we took the time each and every day to make space for things to transform us?

So what would such transformation look like? Rosa says that resonance has three parts to it. First, there is what he calls "affection." There's a tree I pass by regularly, but I take the time to stop and notice it. But more than that, somehow, I allow the tree to

communicate to me, to affect me. I open my heart to it and it's being penetrates me. Second, though, there is also emotion. The tree not only affects me by opening me up to feel its presence. I also, then have an emotional response to it. Call it awe, reverence, gratitude, even love. The tree's presence and being enters me and some emotion is drawn out of me expressed outwardly or just quietly felt. Third and finally, there is efficacy. I don't just open myself to feel and have some emotional response. I now recognize some inner conviction and obligation to act. The tree is part of an ecosystem, an ecosystem that is connected with me and all life. I commit myself anew to be part of the healing and care of creation anew because of my encounter with this particular part of creation, this particular tree.

Imagine if on any given day I have such experiences of resonance - With trees, flowers, animals, other humans. If I am caught up in my busyness, what depth and richness of life am I being cut off from?

Sheila was someone who could teach me something about resonance. Life's purpose is not about being busy and life's fulfillment cannot come in any genuine way from being busy. Rather, life's purpose is about experiencing the resonance of life all around me. Or biblically speaking, life's purpose is about bearing witness to God flowing in and through all that lives, taking the time to notice, to allow God to affect me through the life all around me, drawing heart-felt emotion from me in response, and then enticing me to reciprocate with tangible love.

Have you felt resonance that way? Have you felt God that way?...

So what about us as church, then? How do we measure the faithfulness and impact of church as bearing witness to a God whose resonance in all things may transform us? Well, the question for us is not whether we are a church that is busy. Certainly, if busyness was the measure of a successful church, Armour Heights could compete with the best of them. But the deeper question is this: Are we as a community of faith a place and space that creates opportunities for people to experience resonance? Can people find God and experience something of God here? Do people feel the faith, hope and love in them expand here? Do they feel seen and heard, noticed and cherished here? Do people feel their humanity affects those around them, that people hear them and feel them at an emotional level, and that they reciprocate love toward them?

No church can get it all right. And no community of diverse human beings that we are, with all our ups and downs, our better days and worse days, can be all things to all people. The key, however, is what we're aiming for. It's all about vision. I don't want to be busy. I want to be present. I don't want to measure my significance by how many things I have to do and how many people join our worship and programs. I want to know if people feel heard, befriended in their pain and struggle, but also uplifted,

strengthened and empowered for their journey. Are people better equipped to go out into the world to experience resonance as the hands, feet and heart of Jesus? If the answer is yes, we are onto something here.

May Armour Heights Church not be known simply as a busy church, but as a church where people experience resonance – spiritual resonance, heart-felt resonance, a resonance that transforms even in the midst of struggle. This is our purpose.
Amen.