

SELF-TRANSCENDENCE

Luke 4: 1-13

A few years ago I read a book on the New York times best-seller list I didn't expect to see. The book is entitled: "A life Worth Living: A Guide to What Matters Most." The book was written by a group of theologians who all teach at the prestigious Yale University in the U.S. Why would a book written by a group of theologians make it on a best-seller list? Well, the book is based on one of the most popular courses being taught at Yale to students in their first years of university. Hundreds of students are taking this course, and many are on a waiting list to take it. This book is based on the content of the course, and it is a fascinating book.

The big question it asks is this: What makes life truly worth living? And before you start thinking of people, relationships, experiences, and other things as your answer to what makes life worth living for you, the book actually challenges us to do some thinking and journeying to get to a deeper answer. And this aligns quite well with what this season in the church year we call "Lent" is all about. Lent presumes that beyond all those things that make us who we are as human beings, we are at heart spiritual creatures. As spiritual creatures we need to figure out what makes our lives worth living in a deeply spiritual way in order to find our path toward genuine wholeness. Even if we will never get to perfect wholeness in this life, if we are not on a journey with spiritual wholeness as our destination, we will never discover a life truly worth living for ourselves.

OK, some of us can buy all this at some level. But how do we evaluate what makes life truly worth living? It can't be the same for everyone. But are there criteria for helping us get to an answer for ourselves? Jesus is at the very beginning of a new stage on his journey having come out publicly as the Messiah. How is he going to figure out what that means for himself? How is he going to discern his path to make the life he has been given truly worth living as Messiah?

Well, before we get to Jesus as a guide for ourselves, let me highlight what the book lists as 4 stages we must all pass through on our journey to discovering what can make our lives truly worth living. 4 stages.

1) First, there is: autopilot. Autopilot means that we get to a stage in life where we just do what we do and live as we live without thinking too much about it. Can we do something different or better? Is everything in our lives working as well as it could or should? Are the people around me satisfied or cared for by me sufficiently? Am I as satisfied with myself and my life as I could be? In autopilot mode I don't ask too many questions of myself but am simply content to live my life. If others around me have issues with me or if there may be better ways for me to do what I do and become who I become, I try not to stress myself too much about

it. Sure, I have some habits that may not be the best. Sure, I may frustrate those around me at times. Sure, I may be able to do more and better if I tried harder. But getting through life well is about not over-thinking things and just living life as it comes.

OK, so what do you think about autopilot? Well, as someone who can stress a lot about many things, I can't say autopilot is too bad. There's something admirable about just being content with your life as it is and not fussing too much about what it could or should be. That's how my dog Hektor lives: on autopilot, and I must say some days I envy him.

2) OK, but then there is the 2nd stage, which the authors name: effectiveness. Effectiveness is a stage of life where you cannot remain satisfied with autopilot. You want more and you want better. If you want money, how can you get better at making it? If you want to become better in your work or more successful an artist or in better shape, or a better partner or parent or lover, what steps do you have to take to make yourself more effective at what you do and who you are? We live in a world that is constantly bombarding us with not settling for less and wanting more, that maybe what we have and who we are, are inadequate, that we can do better and be better if we develop the knowledge and skills for greater success. Making our lives worth living is about becoming more effective. And no doubt, this will bring some richer satisfaction in our lives, a deeper feeling of accomplishment and a conviction that we are finding something of genuine purpose in our lives.

But sometimes, we hit a wall, don't we? Some call it a mid-life crisis, whenever in life that happens. We sometimes hit a point where we question things, question what we truly want and what is truly worthwhile, even as we have become good at getting it. Is it really money, or fitness or power or recognition or admiration or popularity and approval from those around us which can truly fill us inside with genuine fullness? If we didn't have all that external noise and pressure, who are we inside and what is it that we are truly made for? Why do we have this deeper unease, anxiety and even dread as we start getting older? Why may things that once seemed to satisfy so much not satisfy the same anymore? Are we caught in a certain kind of autopilot of effectiveness? Are we caught in a loop where we have lost a certain freedom to be because of social pressure to be more and better with our achievements, our possessions, our health, or our love-life?

3) This kind of questioning brings us to what the book calls stage three: self-awareness. This is the stage where we find groups or one-on-one therapy, or other ways where we can ask deeper questions of ourselves. This is the stage that maybe we uncover reasons why we have been so stuck in autopilot or driven by the need for effectiveness. Whether it's in our childhood or some trauma or any number of relational and experiential reasons in life, self-awareness helps us figure out ourselves and perhaps, free ourselves from some of the have-tos and shoulds we've gotten ourselves entangled in over the course of our lives.

And sometimes the journey toward self-awareness and freedom comes after some wall has been hit with our health, some mental health crisis, a breakdown in a relationship leading to loss or divorce, a loss of employment or dissatisfaction in our work... At whatever stage of life this journey toward self-awareness comes, we move into a time of questioning why we do what we do and if we need to do what we do in order to find deeper worth to our living.

But self questioning and even therapy, according to this book, can only taken us so far. Why? Because it's still all about ourselves in ourselves. There's still one more stage the book counsels, a 4th stage to discerning an answer to the question: what makes my life truly worth living. And to get at this 4th stage, let's dig into our scripture reading as we find Jesus at this 3rd stage of self-awareness ready to leap into something more. But to get to this more, he needs to confront all those core temptations in his life the world around him wants to sell him to keep him stuck within the loop of his own self-questioning.

At the outset of our reading, we're told several things. We're told Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit. It means that he is awakened and inspired into seeking some new direction, empowered by a force beyond where he's been thus far. But we're also told that the Spirit is taking him into the wilderness where for 40 days he is tempted by the devil. This is ancient language telling us that Jesus is being taken into some deep inner self-questioning, seeking, and discerning. But it's also a difficult time. It's a time of struggle. But because it's the Spirit taking him there, it's also essential. If Jesus is truly to flourish in his newfound calling as Messiah, he must also confront those negative thoughts and temptations that can lead him into ruin. In the biblical world, evil and harm are personified as the devil.

So, what are the particular temptations to harm Jesus is confronted by that he must work through and get freed from in order to find his path full of the Spirit? There are three temptations:

1. First, it's all about bread and bread represents material prosperity. Imagine manufacturing and amassing all the bread you want. Jesus has that power. He has the gifts. If he aligns himself with the right people, makes this his passion and focus and is willing to sell his soul for material gain, he can get rich. He can make a lot of money. And this can give him great purpose and worth in the world.

2. Second, It's all about the kingdoms of the world. It's all about popularity, recognition, fame. It's about power too. Who doesn't want that? Jesus can have it and have it all. He's got the charisma. He can get the right people backing him if he also backs them. Jesus can go places. He can leave his mark for generations to come just like anyone in power or fame would want.

3. Third, it's all about safety and security. The devil temps Jesus to jump off the highest pinnacle of the temple which is the tallest building in Jerusalem. If God can truly keep you physically safe,

you are truly safe. Who doesn't want greater safety and security with the promise of a deeper mental and spiritual peace?

So then, some core temptations Jesus must face and many of us face at some level too, no? Material gain, and if not wealth, even some solid basics would be nice. Social recognition, popularity and fame would be amazing, but even greater respect, admiration and appreciation from those around us would be nice. Finally, safety and security from all outside threats and dangers would be amazing, but even basic safety and security enough to make us worry less and feel greater peace within would be nice.

But Jesus is also realizing that his call as Messiah is calling him to find his deepest life-worth elsewhere. Jesus is being called to go in a direction where his material security, his physical safety and his social popularity will be threatened. Why? And how can this make his life worth living?

4) This brings us to the final and most important stage to what makes life most truly worth living according to our book: self-transcendence. So, what's self-transcendence? On this Black History month, let me point to the figure of Martin Luther King Jr, as a wonderful modern-day example of what Jesus was being drawn into as self-transcendence.

MLK, as he's called, did not start out wanting to change the world. But something stirred in him and unsettled him and would not let him rest. The plight of his people, black people, pressed in on him. The call of God transcended his own wants and needs, and he felt compelled to listen to that call to find his purpose and worth. **What or who is calling to you beyond your immediate self in order to find yourself?...**

MLK could have gone on autopilot, finishing his studies for the ministry, finishing his PH.D with distinction, preaching, teaching and finding a life of service for God that would pay him a decent salary, provide some solid security surrounded by a large family and a supportive, responsive community where he would receive plenty of recognition. What else can anyone want? And yet, the stirring of the Spirit was calling him elsewhere.

Would MLK have done what he did for fame? He never imagined that fighting for a greater justice for his people would get him positive fame. It wasn't about the money and certainly not for the safety and security as he experienced threats to his life on a regular basis. From autopilot he developed ever greater effectiveness in preaching and making speeches, in rallying people to the cause and even getting many white people on board. If anyone could do it, it was MLK. And yet, for all his effectiveness as a leader and inspirer for greater justice, systemic racism is stubborn, and those in privilege have a lot to lose in giving it up and becoming accountable.

In his last years MLK would have had more days of discouragement than encouragement. He hit the 3rd stage of self-awareness and self-questioning very hard. Where was all this leading? How would he face failure? Was all this about him in the end, or was it for the greater cause of justice? Like Jesus, MLK would have had his 40 days in the wilderness of self-questioning throughout.

And yet, in the end, it was all bigger than him. Self-transcendence is the call of God beyond yourself. You can only truly find yourself, your purpose and what makes your life truly worth living, when you hear the call from God beyond yourself for others. Even as MLK lost his life in the end, we know of few people in history who would have lived a life more truly worth living.

What about you and me?... Obviously, we're not MLK. But who is our neighbour? What ways are we called to transcend ourselves in order to better find ourselves with the call of compassion, justice, and care in very specific ways? Without discovering such a call, we can never discover a life truly worth living.

In this season of Lent, as you evaluate all in your life that is autopilot, all that is driven by the promise of purpose and worth through greater effectiveness, and all the work of self-awareness and self-questioning, may you also hear the call to self-transcendence by God in a new way. Even as Lent comes around every year, each year, and this very moment, you are at a place in your life and before God you have never been before... Claim it, own it, and offer it up to God. Listen to God's call to you, and pray for the courage, the grace, and the power to make the journey you need to make before God, in the world, and in yourself... Amen.