

“The Meaning of Life”

Big Question #3

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson

December 4, 2005

Reading

Ask Me

by William Stafford

Some time when the river is ice ask me mistakes I have made. Ask me whether what I have done is my life. Others have come in their slow way into my thought, and some have tried to help or to hurt: ask me what difference their strongest love or hate has made.

*I will listen to what you say.
You and I can turn and look
at the silent river and wait. We know
the current is there, hidden; and there
are comings and goings from miles away
that hold the stillness exactly before us.
What the river says, that is what I say.*

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Sermon

So why are you here? I mean, why are you here today, in this room with all these other people? Maybe looking for something? Maybe a little wisdom or inspiration to get through another day? Maybe hoping your life will be more full? Maybe it is the sermons. Maybe the choir. Maybe the organ. Maybe it is the people around you. Maybe for your kids; maybe you are here like Guy Noir looking for answers to life's persistent questions. Maybe you are here to find how to live a better life, and you have heard, or thought, that a house of faith is one place to seek that. Maybe you are here to find the meaning of life.

The meaning of life—it's the big one, isn't it?

Some years ago a teenager called me to ask a couple of questions. She was a senior in high school and just a terrific kid. She had to interview a member of the clergy for a class project and she told me that she had two questions for me. The first

was the class question but the second was hers, and it was the harder question, but the real one.

The class question was about how war might be justified, and so I talked for a bit about my own war theory. They had been studying “classic” just war theory. Like the classical theory, I told her I believed wars were only justified in terms of self-defense or in the defense of others, to counter active and overt aggression. World Wars I and II are clear examples of this. Just as individuals have the right to self-defense, so do nations. But war is always a last resort.

If she had called me this year, I would have said that this current war fails under nearly any criteria. Its ends were unclear and it was not undertaken in response to a direct threat; it was not a last resort, and it was begun without broad consensus and under false pretenses.

So I asked what her second question was; she chuckled a little and said it was the hard one and she didn't expect an answer. It was, “What's the meaning of life?”

My response was, “Oh, that's the easy one.”

All she had to do was get the Monty Python movie of the same name which concludes—if any Python production can be said to conclude anything—that the meaning of life has to do with sex and death, and being kind and enjoying oneself in between.

Or I could have told her to watch the re-run of “Everybody Loves Raymond” where the question comes up, again having to do with sex, though the answer ends up having to do with love and play and new life.

Or to watch that great religious movie “City Slickers” where Jack Palance says to Billy Crystal, “Do you know what the secret of life is? One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and everything else don't mean anything.”

To which Billy Crystal asks, “Yeah, but what’s that one thing?”

And Jack Palance replies, “That’s what you’ve got to figure out.”

What is the meaning of life, or what is our purpose here on earth? What should we do and how should we live? What is the meaning of our life? Why are we here? What is our purpose?

Is there a bigger question than this one? Why are we here? What gives us meaning, what is right, what can we know, how can we be with others, how do we face death, why is there evil, is life fair? Is there a God? How should we live? Big questions. We all ask them, time and time again. We ask them when we are young and when we are older. We hear our children ask them, we hear the world ask them.

Another time, after a mom and her young son came to me (he was 8-1/2), his mom told me he had been asking the question over the summer. “What’s the purpose of our life,” he asked me, “especially if we are all going to die?” I have been asked this question by older people as they neared death and who wondered aloud with me whether their lives had been meaningful, by middle-aged people as they looked back and forward in their lives, and by the young.

Mary Oliver, the great poet, asks at the end of one of her poems, “tell me, what do you plan to do with your one, wild and precious life?” Big questions.

My office is full of books with those questions, and with some of the answers. From the Hebrew Bible comes Micah’s exhortation to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God. Jesus said the meaning of life was to love your God with heart, soul, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself. The Buddha said the meaning of life was to be awake and mindful and to be compassionate. Aristotle suggested that it was to be aware of oneself; Kant proposed that it meant acting in a way that is congruent with universal laws; Martin Buber said it was to live a life of dialogue; Abraham Heschel said the meaning of life was found in wonder. Viktor Frankl said it was found in hope and our response to life; Tillich suggested that it meant being courageous and affirming life itself. Sartre said

there is no meaning but what we create, that life is made in our actions.

It is an old question.

And it seems to me that all of the answers get at something very basic, and for me it was said most clearly by Sigmund Freud—that meaning comes, our purpose is found, in love and work. Our life has meaning from relationships with others and in being useful. Love and work, relationships and usefulness

So, no, I said to that teen, the meaning of life is not the mystery. The mystery is why we so easily and so often sabotage others and ourselves in living as we know we should. The mystery is why we forget what does matter, or ignore what is most important. The mystery is in how easily we won’t recognize the deep meaning our lives do have. Anyone here want to live a useless life or one empty of love? I sure hope not.

When that young boy asked me what our purpose is, I asked him, “When do you feel best about yourself or who you are? Doing what kind of stuff?” He answered “art,” and paused and added “friends.” I suggested that he was on his way to his own answer: love—friends and work—art. He already knew.

Does this make sense? It does to me: Love and work, relationships and usefulness.

Love and work. I have thought for as long as I can remember that it is no great mystery how to love others. It is to be kind and attentive (maybe especially attentive), to be forgiving and accepting, to be honest and be loyal. I think that we all know this. This need for love and the understanding of it is built into our very bones.

And so with work as well; or, to put it in a better way, with being useful. When I look out here at you, I see all the useful and important things you do: being parents and, for many of us now, being care-taking children of our own parents; working to educate our young; discovering new things in science; cleaning up the world; providing needed services to others; defending our liberty; creating things; helping business work fairly and productively; serving our country in government service. All these things are good and useful.

And it seems to me that all of our work, whether it be in our homes or in businesses or in the community, is capable of being sanctified work. All of our work, whatever it is, can be sanctified when it is done with love.

Love and work. That's it—the meaning of life. Love others and be useful. That's it. That's it.

Simple isn't it?

So why is there still this gnawing in our souls sometimes, these questions late at night, this soul-searching about whether we are living as we should? Why don't we love better? Is what I am doing worth anything? When I am at the end of my life, how will I look back on it? Will I be satisfied or in despair?

I have witnessed both: people at the end of their life believing it was a good life, or at least good enough, and people in despair believing that they had wasted so much. We only get to go around once so perhaps we should make the best of it. Yes?

Here is a vision for this congregation: It starts with the question Why are you here? What do you expect to get from being here? The purpose of this church is to help each and all of us find meaning in our lives—learn how to be better at love and work, learn how to be better at relationships and be more useful. I believe that this congregation exists to help us live better lives. That is our mission: to help us all live better lives.

And we do this in four areas of life: spiritually, ethically, intellectually, relationally. We come to worship, sit in silence, listen to the wisdom of the world's religions, hear beautiful or stirring music. We seek the sacred here in our midst; we listen for the voice of God in this room. We grow spiritually.

And we grow intellectually through our education programs for children and adults. We UUs are a curious and a learning bunch of people.

And we grow ethically through our Social Justice activities—we make the world better. We know that the world goes on indifferent to the sufferings and tragedies in the houses of men and women and children. Each day, people suffer. Each day, there are acts of evil. Each day, the wall of civilization, as Thomas Friedman likes to mention, is battered,

punched, broken. Each day is witness to evil and to courage, to heroism and cowardice. And we come here to be a part of the healing of the world.

And we grow in relationship. Martin Buber, my favorite theologian, argued that we live best in relationship, that what is sacred and most meaningful is found in relationship. Indeed, we gather here in community, in a beloved community, so that we might not be so alone in this world.

We do this privately and publicly; we grow inwardly and outwardly. The purpose of the church is to help people have life and have it more abundantly, as Jesus said. It is to grow a soul, as Channing said. The purpose of the church is to empower us to lives of service and integrity and joy. We do it in these four areas— relationally, intellectually, spiritually, and ethically.

It is love and work—love of self and world and others, love of justice and learning and the spiritual. And work—seeking the deeper, the higher dimension; seeking the new; working for justice and peace and equality; promoting understanding and tolerance.

Love and work—it is all so clear. To give meaning to what was beyond understanding, to seize the moment for the good, to affirm what is true and noble, to capture history for ourselves, we turn to love and to work.

And it is so easy, isn't it? So easy to forget.

Remember the poem, "Ask me whether what I have done is my life."

When you ask yourself that question, what answer do you receive? Have you loved as you could or should? Have you found your work, found how to be useful? Are you the person you can be? Is your life what it should be?

Remember when you read Plato for the first time? Do people still read Plato? But remember how exhilarating it was, the whole Socratic method, the idea that we already know and that we just need reminding. I loved that. So with this, I am just reminding you of what you already know. This church is here just to remind you of what you

already know—love others, be useful, serve the world, be kind to others.

So ask again, is what you have done your life?

Can you love better and do better work? I mean your work as a human—as parent or friend or boss or co-worker or son or daughter or partner—that work. Can we do better, be better, help each other become better? I imagine so. I know I can.

We visited my Mom over Thanksgiving and she is doing well. From what seemed like the door of death a month ago, she is now well and in charge of her life. She is 94, and most of you know how much

she means to me and how much I think of her. I asked her some years ago why she went to church. She is a Lutheran, a professional Lutheran by now, and has been very active in her church her whole life. She is deeply religious with a strong faith. When I asked her why she went to church, she answered this way: she said she went to church because she thought it could help her be a better person.

It's a big question, this one. But I do believe we know the answer to it. We'll say it in different ways and live it out in different ways, but in some fashion, it'll come down to this—love and work.