The Meaning of Life

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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1 John 5:11-12
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It seems audacious to attempt a sermon on the meaning of life. Preaching on a topic of such epic proportions seems presumptuous; even intimidating.

People have wrestled with life’s meaning since the dawn of time. Some claim to have found meaning in life. Others insist life has no meaning after all. Do we create meaning or has it been created for us?

Anthony Kronmen, former dean at Yale Law School, has written a book with a provocative title, *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*. He observes that questions about life’s meaning have all but disappeared from college and university curriculums. Back in the day, a liberal arts education considered it something of a mandate to wrestle with this meaning of life question. The humanities, philosophy and religion led the way. Now the question has been eliminated from higher education. Teachers have lost confidence to instruct or engage on the subject. The research ideal and its values have been substituted in its place.

Kronmen’s evaluation certainly rings true in my experience. I’m a product of a liberal arts education. As a religion major, my instructors spent far more time grappling with whether or not Jesus could have possibly said what is recorded in the gospels than anything he might have contributed to the question of life’s meaning.

I’m not naïve. Colleges need to train students to meet the growing demands of research-driven careers, but must we do so at the expense of life’s ultimate question?

The meaning of life is central to Jesus’ life and ministry. If we were to count up the number of times Jesus says something about life’s meaning, it would total a staggering number.

There are two Greek words for life in the gospels. *Bios* refers to natural, physical life. We derive our English word biology from this Greek word. *Bios* is quantitative life, which is measured with clocks and calendars.
The Greek word *zoe* refers to life in its essence. Our English word *zoology* originates from this word. *Zoe* life is spiritual in nature. It is life lived in relationship to God. While *bios* is measured in quantitative terms, *zoe* is distinctly qualitative. *Zoe* is life lived in all of its essence and fullness.

Whenever Jesus speaks about life, he talks exclusively about *zoe* life. Even if people kill the body, they can never take this *zoe* life from Jesus’ followers.

Jesus said, “I have come that you may have life (*zoe*) and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Jesus offers his followers a full, abundant life.

Life is a major theme in John’s epistle. John authors two books that bear his name: the Gospel according to John and the three letters known as 1st, 2nd and 3rd John. John identifies Jesus at the outset of his first letter as the Word of life (1:1-2). He drives home the theme of Jesus’ life in the body of his letter: “God sent his only Son into the word so that we might life through him” (4:9). He summarizes this life at the end of his letter this way: “God has given us eternal life and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (5:11-12).

We tend to associate eternal life with things far away and ethereal. We treat eternal life as a place you go after you die. When Jesus talks about eternal life, he always speaks of it in present tense. We enter eternal life now which extends into God’s forever future. Jesus doesn’t merely offer us afterlife. He offers abundant life. Our goal is not to get to heaven. Our goal is to get heaven into us.

How on earth is it possible for one person, namely Jesus, to live inside of us, separated by thousands of years? Jesus tells his disciples before his departure, “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Holy Spirit will not come to you” (John 16:7).

Jesus accepted the limitations that come with living in a human body. While in a body, Jesus knows he can only be one place at a time. But in his risen, exalted state, Jesus can now be everywhere at once. When we
invite Jesus into our lives, we are asking his Spirit, called the Holy Spirit, to take up residence in our hearts.

When we invite Jesus’ Spirit to live in us, this Spirit begins to exert influence over us. The Spirit lets us know when we live according to God’s intentions. The Spirit also alerts us when we have gone off the rails. When I became a Christian, the Spirit began to work in my conscience. Things began to bother me that never used to faze me; things like my self-centeredness and my obligation to help the poor. The Spirit wouldn’t let me get away with any funny business.

Look! Jesus is not only our cosmic buddy. Jesus wants to transform us into the people he wants us to become.

One benefit of serving a church a long time is the privilege of watching Christ come alive in people. I’ve witnessed some thrilling transformations in my day. I’ve watched some of you come to faith in Christ and grow into mature disciples. Some of you are virtually unrecognizable from the day I first met you. The transformation in your life has been life-changing. The way you order your life, what you value and where you spend your time and money has changed dramatically over the years.

Lee Strobel was once a hard-charging, secular journalist. When he came to Christ, his priorities turned upside down. His conversion occurred when his daughter Allison was 5-years-old. Her dad was something of a paradox. He could be loving, but there also were times when he became angry and downright profane. She remembers the night her dad kicked a hole in the living room wall.

Five months after Lee’s conversion, Allison said to her mom, “Mommy, I want God to do for me what’s he’s done for daddy.” Even as a child, Allison could see the change in her dad’s heart. At the tender age of 5, Allison gave her life to Christ.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

This morning we’re confirming 32 high school students into our church. I came across a sermon Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached to the students
confirmed in his church in April, 1938. Bonhoeffer led the resistance movement to thwart Hitler’s takeover of the German Protestant Church. In his sermon, Bonhoeffer spoke about confirmation as a beginning rather than a conclusion. I’ve often said that confirmation is an initiation into the body of Christ, rather than graduation from church. Yet, sad to say, when some students complete confirmation class, they check out and we never see them again.

Bonhoeffer counseled his students not to rely on their good intentions. He urged them to rely on the One to whom they confess. We rejoice at your growing resolve to live for Christ. But the spiritual life you profess will not be maintained by your good intentions. It will be sustained by the One who saves you.

Bonhoeffer warned his students about the ever-present threat of temptation. “Satan, Lucifer, will come to you, handsome and alluring, innocent and with the appearance of life. He will obscure God’s law and call it into doubt. He will rob you of the joy God intends for you to enjoy.” It’s easy to profess faith in the company of a loving family and a supportive church. It’s harder to practice it when we are surrounded by temptations.

Some of you will doubt Jesus’ words about life and test the limits. People will invariably sidle up to you and offer you all sorts of things that promise life. Do this. Try that. Let me save you lots of heartache. Only Jesus gives real life. Don’t settle for cheap substitutes. Jesus offers abundant life. “Whoever has the Son has life.”

I have three suggestions for our students and everyone, for that matter.

First, practice the spiritual disciplines—prayer, Scripture meditation and worship. They are called disciplines because they take repeated practice to become proficient at doing them. I like what Madeline L’Engle said about the discipline of prayer, “Prayer is like playing the piano. You won’t do it well every single day, but unless you do it every single day, you’re never going to do it well.”
I have found through the years that prayer is not so much asking for stuff. Prayer is asking God to change my heart. When I pray, God doesn’t always change my circumstances. More often God changes me.

Second, cultivate spiritual friends. Lots of people talk about negative peer pressure, yet peer pressure can also be positive. Students are not the only ones susceptible to negative peer pressure. All of us are influenced by our peers, whether positively or negatively. Are your friends turning you toward Christ or away from Christ? If they are turning you away from Christ, maybe you need new spiritual friends.

Third, show generosity. Jesus told his followers that some things in life are lost by being hoarded and saved by being given away. It may seem premature to talk about “giving” to students who don’t have many assets. Start now. I have found, especially in an affluent area like Northern Virginia, that one of the best ways to disarm the power of money is to give some of it away. The best antidote to greed is generosity.

Jesus’ offer is still on the table: “I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly!” He’s offering you zoe life—life in all its essence and fullness.