

A Purpose Worth Remembering

Nehemiah 8:8-10; Luke 4:14-21

Whitefish UMC

January 24, 2010

- † Lying on the coffee table in our son's home for several visits now is the wonderful novel One Hundred Years of Solitude, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The novel tells the story of a small town in South America named Macondo. Macondo is surrounded by a swamp, which accounts for its solitude.
- † One day a little girl wanders into Macondo. She has fled her village, where there has been an outbreak of a plague that causes insomnia. A family in Macondo takes her in and later notices that one of their daughters can't sleep. The plague has followed the little girl to Macondo.
- † And at first people believed the plague wouldn't be too bad, because if you can't sleep, you have lots of time to do other things. But they soon discovered another telltale symptom of the plague: loss of memory. Then people began to forget things like the names for the tools they worked with and where they put them.
- † The people fought this loss of memory by labeling things with their respective names, so that all they had to do was read the inscription to identify the items: table, chair, clock, door, wall, pan, cow, pig, and on and on.
- † Later it occurred to them that they might forget what those things were for. So they made the signs more elaborate. The sign they hung around the cow

read, “This is a cow. She must be milked every morning so that she will produce milk, and the milk must be boiled in order to be mixed with coffee to make coffee and milk.”

- † To be sure that they never forgot where they were, the people erected a sign where the road emerged from the swamp. The sign read: “This is the village of Macondo.” And on the main street, where everyone would see it, they erected a larger sign that read, “God exists.”
- † And so they went on living, Marquez writes, in a reality that captured momentarily in words that described what was most necessary for life. But that reality would be lost forever when the people forgot the meaning of the letters.
- † Sometimes I wonder if we are becoming like the people of Macando. Are we in the process of forgetting who we are meant to be and what we are meant to do? Are we seeking purpose for our lives, or are we living aimlessly or by habit?
- † As the population of our country continues to live longer, diseases affecting memory afflict more and more elders and their families, including ours. Losing memory and purpose are understandable in those who suffer from dementia and Alzheimer’s disease.
- † The other evening, Tom and I watched a good independent film called “The Answer Man.” It stars Jeff Daniels and several more obscure actors. The character portrayed by Jeff Daniels is Arlen Faber, an author who twenty years ago wrote a book called “Me and God.” The book proved to be an unexpected hit and created a rabid cult following. The problem is that everyone now wants to ask him to answer their questions about everything from fate to free will and the stock market.

- † To get away from the mobs that pursue him, Arlen has become a recluse. One day his mailman “connects the dots” as they say (Don’t you hate that phrase these days?). Before Arlen can slam the door in his face, the mailman asks earnestly “Is there a hell?” Arlen replies by quoting Jean Paul Sartre. “Hell is other people,” he growls.
- † Arlen has abandoned and forgotten all the wisdom other people think he has. He wants nothing to do with God, and so he is clearing his library of all the books he has collected about life and faith and meaning over the years. In doing so, his back snaps out of whack, and so he goes to a chiropractor down the street who has just set up shop. She helps him relieve his back pain, and he discovers her struggles as a single mom.
- † Meanwhile, Arlen tries to get a used bookseller to take all his books. Turns out the owner has just come out of rehab for alcoholism. His father is drinking himself to death, and he is tempted to join him, to negate his fragile recovery and just join his father in oblivion.
- † Arlen doesn’t want to be drawn into these people’s lives. Then in one scene, we notice that many things in his apartment are labeled with their function. As Arlen takes the signs down forcefully, we learn that his father, with whom he lived, has just died from Alzheimer’s disease.
- † All of the characters in “The Answer Man” struggle with their purpose in life and where to find it. And many of us can relate. We are tempted someday to run away, pull the covers over our heads, or numb ourselves into not feeling the pain of life. Life can be brutal and short, unfair and cruel, or so it often seems, especially at this time of year.
- † We look for answers, sometimes in the self-help books at Borders or at Amazon.com. One preacher, John Cairns, in Chicago says “You see it all the time—people wandering around a display table, picking up a book, reading

the comments on the dust jacket or skimming through the table of contents. Then they'll put it down and pick up another. This is not the fiction table....

† The constant hope is that some phrase will strike a chord, will suggest that these pages might just contain that clear and unambiguous word about life, about your life, my life. The hope that springs eternal is that we will catch a sense, an image, a picture of our true selves, that we will find a solution to our dilemma of what life is supposed to be about.”

† Cairns then goes on to suggest that although we like to think we are intelligent, thoughtful people capable of discovering our own answers to these purpose of life questions, given the right resources, we are looking in the wrong places.

† Being a preacher, it's no surprise to learn that he suggests that the Bible has a lot to say about life's purpose and meaning. So maybe we should spend more time with the Bible than with the stuff at Borders. But then he tells an amazing story.

† *“I was in a conversation recently with a couple of church members, deeply involved people who are around here a lot. I can't remember the exact subject of the conversation, but at some point, one of them said, “Well, you know what they say: ‘The Lord helps those who help themselves.’” My officious nature got the best of me and I replied, “Most people who say that think it is a quote from the Bible, but it isn't.” “It isn't? I always thought it was.” “Well,” I said offhandedly, “we probably need to get you all into some Bible study so you can learn what it says and what it doesn't.” There was no quick retort, no reply of any kind, just exchanged glances. Suddenly the mood in the room shifted. It was as if I had suggested walking barefoot through burning coals. “What's the matter?” I asked. It took a little while—there was a lot of hemming and hawing—but when we finally*

got to the reason for their reaction, it went something like this: It was their assumption that if they started to do serious Bible study, they would soon become just like those people whom they could not abide—people who have a biblical quote for every circumstance, who are fanatically self-assured, and who treat any challenge to their pronouncements as clear evidence of heathen leanings!

What a strange reality. Regular churchgoing folk who had been scared away from the Bible by those whose use of it had turned them off, had disgusted them. Regular churchgoing folks whose approach to those haunting questions about the purpose of life was to wander around the tables in Borders and to ask their friends and acquaintances what they were reading, because the Bible had become off-limits for them.

Trust me on this: our reason for promoting regular study of the Bible is not to turn you all into overzealous, verse-quoting marketers of faith formulas. Rather, it is to provide us with insight into who we are meant to be, to provide insights to help us deal with life's perplexing questions.”

- † Take, for instance, the passages we just read this morning. First listen in the Old Testament reading of Nehemiah, where the people had forgotten the law of the Lord. The scribe Ezra brings out the book of Moses, and the people hear the word of God and understand. They worship the Lord and are blessed.
- † Then in Luke's gospel, Jesus has returned to his hometown of Nazareth and goes into the synagogue where he is given the scripture of the day to read. It's from the book of Isaiah and he reads: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent

me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

- † Then he tells those who are gathered there that this passage is beginning to be accomplished right then and there. It's a moment of dramatic significance, because this moment announces who Jesus is, what his ministry will be, and what ultimately his church and his followers are meant to be and do.
- † But are those just some words in an ancient and dusty land and time from long ago? No. They are meant for us, and they are as fresh as the morning sunlight through the fog. What life is supposed to be about is bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives.
- † Oh, you say, but what if that is not my thing and what if I don't have much contact with the poor and oppressed and captives? My answer is that it is your thing and you do have contact with the poor and oppressed and captives. Because, as the saying goes, “they is us.”
- † Poverty comes in many forms: physical, spiritual, emotional. And who among us has not felt oppressed and captive by the sense of futility that can threaten to overwhelm us? I don't know about you, but I have been subject to just that sort of oppressive futility lately.
- † And do you know what the only thing that helps is? Returning to the God's word for my life and yours. I don't think it's an accident that today's scripture lessons speak especially to me, and I hope to us, today. Because the Spirit of the Lord is upon US, anointing us with God's purpose for our lives and our world.
- † Did you know that our only Bible study just about faded away a month ago? But with God's Spirit, new people are coming this month and we are being reminded of our purpose: to be courageous followers of Jesus.

- † We don't do this alone or the same way. We are each different, with unique gifts for ministry and living. But when we gather together to support and encourage each other, to pray for one another, what a difference we make!
- † I know it's hard to find the time to study the Bible, to gather in a group. I am working on an experiment: an online Bible study of the book of Psalms. It's not the same as being together face to face, but it may be a start for some of us.
- † Remember "The Answer Man" and the characters who had forgotten their purpose? Arlen the reclusive writer, and the single mom chiropractor, and the recovering alcoholic bookseller only find their bearings and meaning when they open themselves to love and relationship. Of course there are risks, but there are also great rewards. And of course this is Hollywood, right?
- † So what about you? Where will you look for your purpose and for the meaning of your life? Why not take a lesson from the scriptures, starting today. Hear the words we read earlier from the book of Nehemiah: "For this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." Amen.

Sources:

John Cairns, "A Reading on Purpose," <http://fourthchurch.org>

David Jones, "Everything Depends on Remembering," <http://day1.org>

"The Answer Man," Magnolia Pictures, 2009.