

Sermon for September 3, 2017

"Are You Living or Just Surviving?"

Matthew 16:21-28

Are you living or just surviving? There's a big difference between the two. It's a matter of quality of life. To merely survive means that your body is functioning, but there is no meaning to life. That's how many people are today. Maybe that's why zombie movies are so popular now. Real life means living with a purpose. Living means having a life that is full and meaningful.

Quality of life is an important issue for many people today. The bookstores are full of self-help books. All of them designed to help you find more meaning in life. People do all kinds of things seeking meaning. People take assertiveness training or join encounter groups. Interest in spirituality and religion is a result of people looking for purpose and direction. Some throw themselves into their profession because they hope to find purpose and meaning there. All this activity just to improve their quality of life.

Of course there are some who don't try to improve the quality of their life. These are the ones who lose themselves in drugs or gambling or indulgent lifestyles. They are really trying to escape the meaninglessness of life; to fill the void with stuff. They are trying to hide from themselves and others the utter emptiness of their lives. They are merely surviving instead of really living.

Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."(John 10:10) Jesus says he can give us an abundant life. A life with meaning; a life with purpose. If we will believe in him and follow him, we will be living and not merely surviving. This is the answer to what so many people are seeking. It is the promise of deliverance from the emptiness so many are trying to escape.

But Jesus reveals some truths about this way of life in his words to his disciples from Matthew. He says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." This seems contrary to everything that many are doing to find fulfillment. They aren't trying to deny themselves; they are trying to actualize themselves. The world glories in the self. They even have a magazine by that name. The product of the "me" generation. They don't want to lose themselves, instead they spend a lot of time trying to find themselves.

And what's this stuff about taking up a cross. A cross is and instrument of torture. One who carries a cross is one who is bearing humiliation and shame. One who bears a cross is one who bears public reproach. Is Jesus saying that we must be humiliated and tortured and ridiculed to find abundant life? That doesn't make sense!

And then Jesus says, "For those who want to save their lives will lose it and those who lose their lives for my sake will find it." That makes little sense at first glance. Logic dictates that if you lose your life you lose it, period. Logically, if you want to save your life, you should hold on to it with all your might.

What Jesus says here may seem illogical, but it is ever so true. Let's begin with "those who lose their life will find it." The story goes that a soldier was wounded on a cold battlefield. The medic on the scene quickly realized that a major artery had been severed and he could not stop the bleeding. No matter what the medic did, by the time help arrived the patient would bleed to death. So he quickly removed the blankets and took off the soldier's coat. The cold air took effect and hypothermia set in and the man froze to the point that his heart stopped. The soldier was rapidly moved to a medical facility where the artery could be sealed. Then he was revived. By inducing hypothermia the medic had stopped the bleeding and bought the patient some time. In order to save that soldier's life, he had to lose it. It was a risk. There was the chance that the doctors couldn't revive him. Or that brain damage would still occur because of lack of oxygen. But otherwise the man would have surely bled to death. But what would it have profited him to ward off hypothermia and lose the patient. Likewise "what does it profit them if they gain the whole world and lose their life?"

Let me tell you another story; a more familiar one. Jesus took up a cross and "endured great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes."(Matt. 16:21) He died on a cross for the sins of the world. But he rose again to give eternal life. He could have avoided the suffering and the death, but he would have lost abundant-eternal life of all of us. Instead he lost his life, so that he could win us eternal life.

If you think about it, it really makes sense that the only way to get a meaningful life is to lose our life. First of all Jesus said, "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Jesus is not just talking about losing our life period, but giving it away for Christ and his kingdom. That makes sense because meaning is not found in ourselves. You can't find purpose by indulging yourself. The world has been trying that since the dawn of time and it hasn't worked yet. Purpose is found in Christ. Meaning is not found in serving ourselves, but in serving others in the name of Christ. Abundant life isn't derived from humans, but it is given from above by Almighty God.

Are you living or just surviving? The answer to this question is a matter of life and death. Because merely surviving is actually a living death. While living means having an abundant and meaningful life. Are you aimlessly wandering through your days with no purpose other than to keep your physiological functions working so you can stay out of the cemetery? Or is every day full of the love and joy of your Heavenly Father?

Do you want an abundant life, or a more abundant life? Give your life away, then you will find it. Give your heart to Jesus in devotion, and he will give you enough love to overflow your heart. Give Jesus your hands and feet in service, and he will fill your life with inner joy. Take up your cross of suffering and shame so that others may see the way to eternal life.

Don't get me wrong, if you choose an abundant life you will suffer. If God didn't spare Jesus from suffering, would God spare you? That suffering is necessary so that others can know the joy of liberation and salvation. People will ridicule you for giving yourself away. They will despise you for denying the material wealth and ideologies that they hold to. They will persecute and mistreat you for bringing Good News and liberation to those who they oppress.

But the reward is great. For what is it to preserve your life, when that life is a living death? Isn't it better to give up surviving so that you can start living? Your reward for giving yourself away to Christ will be sharing the wonderful saving work of God in this world. And when Jesus returns, you will know an even greater reward.