

Romans 6:1-11

"What is the Meaning of Life?"

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I once saw a cartoon featuring a poor religious wanderer with a long beard and a haggard expression and a worn old staff in one hand. He was standing at a fork in the road, and in between the two paths ahead of him there was a sign. On it was an arrow pointing to the right with the caption, "The Meaning of Life". Below that was another arrow, pointing to the left and bearing the caption, "Cheese and Crackers". The point of the cartoon is that we don't know which path the religious wanderer will choose. Will he choose the simple pleasure on his left - the cheese and crackers? Or will he be lured to the right by the promise of answering a question that has plagued humankind for ages? Which one would you choose?

Now you're not likely to ever find yourself in the same situation as our religious wanderer in the cartoon, but you do have to admit that you've wondered before about the meaning of life. Maybe you've stood in front of a mirror, just looking at yourself and contemplating the sheer mystery and wonder of the reality that is you. You exist! You have thoughts and feelings and memories and hopes and dreams. You are alive, and the gift of life that you've been given is an amazing thing. Maybe you've stood looking out over the wonder of God's creation and its incredible diversity of life, and been overwhelmed by the awesome splendor that God has created. And maybe, like just about everyone who has ever walked the planet, you wonder what it's all for. Maybe you've wondered why you're here, or why all these things exist, or what this life is for. If you have, you're not alone.

Last week in my sermon on dinosaurs and the relationship between faith and science, I mentioned the relatively new openness of science to the world of faith. It seems that the more science discovers, the more mysterious things seem. That means that science is increasingly open to asking the kinds of questions that the faith community has been struggling with for centuries. Even now, in 2011, scientists who study the universe around us don't have any good explanation for why there is *something* instead of *nothing*. The universe could have just as easily been a barren and lifeless place, but that's not the case at all. The more we discover about our universe, the more we realize that it seems to be tuned for life to arise. There are no good scientific explanations for why this is the case, and so we now find scientists asking questions like, "What's it all for? Why are we here? What is the meaning of life?" Whether we be scientists or believers or both, there are a number of ways that we might try to answer the question.

For instance, we may answer it by taking a look at how we spend our time. Presumably, the things that we spend the most time doing would end up being the things that are most important to us and give our lives the most meaning. But then again, in any given day, the average person spends several hours sleeping, several more hours working, at least a few hours watching television, an hour or so doing household chores, and then about an hour each eating, traveling, socializing, or spending time in leisure. One of the great paradoxes of life is that we don't spend the majority of our time doing things that give our lives the most meaning. Far too often, things like work and travel get in the way of other more meaningful things like spending time with family or engaging in religious discipline. If you went on our church-wide retreat to Montreat earlier this year, you'll remember that we were all called to rearrange the ways that we spend our time so that we give more of it to those things that are the most meaningful to us. That's easier said than done, however, and it still doesn't answer the question about the meaning of life.

We may also attempt to find an answer by looking at the things with which we surround ourselves. We all spend incredible amounts of time acquiring things, and we attach a great deal of meaning to things and become sentimentally attached to our possessions. But while our things are important to us, they certainly aren't what life is all about. Someone once said that "life is tragic for the person who has plenty to live *on* but nothing to live *for*." I'm reminded of a scene in Tennessee Williams's play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in which Big Daddy

and his son, Brick, are down in the basement having a basic father-son talk about life and about how Brick is going to turn his life around. The basement is crammed with all of the stuff that Big Daddy has accumulated throughout his life; there's old furniture, lamps, pictures, luggage, souvenirs from all over the world, knick-knacks that once seemed important and irresistible but now seem absurd—all of it stacked, floor to ceiling, wall to wall. Brick is struggling with the meaning of his life, and in that moment he looks around at all of his father's stuff and asks a profoundly important question: "Big Daddy, why'd you buy all this junk?" And Big Daddy answers, "Because I wanted to live . . . because I wanted my life to amount to something."¹ The point of that scene is that while we attach great meaning to our possessions, they cannot return the favor. They cannot bestow meaning upon our lives, and so even in the midst of all of our stuff, we are left wondering what it's all for.

Answering questions about the meaning of life is a difficult thing to do. We are left with one dead end after another, and we may end up feeling like we may as well go along with that bumper sticker that says, "WHAT IF THE HOKEY-POKEY REALLY IS WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT?" We are left with a variety of answers about life's meaning and purpose, none of which are satisfying. H.G. Wells once said in his later years, "I have no peace. All life is at the end of the tether." The poet Byron said, "My days are in yellow leaf, the flowers and fruits of life are gone, the worm and the canker, and the grief are mine alone." Literary genius Henry David Thoreau said, "Most men live lives of quiet desperation." And Ralph Barton, one of the top cartoonists of the nations, left this note pinned to his pillow before taking his own life: "I have had few difficulties, many friends, great successes; I have gone from wife to wife, from house to house, visited great countries of the world, but I am fed up with inventing devices to fill up twenty-four hours of the day."

You see, filling up the hours is not enough. Human beings are wired for meaning. We seek meaning and purpose even when there seems to be none. We need for things to make some kind of sense. We need to know why we're doing what we're doing.

It is the purpose of religion to help us figure out the answer to the question. It is the purpose of religion to help us understand and affirm and then live out the meaning of our lives. And if you're a follower of Jesus Christ, you will find meaning and purpose by following the one who called you in the first place. Each of the four gospels describe the way that Jesus' ministry began, and they all say that he went out among people who were very good at filling the hours, very good at fishing, and farming, and tax collecting, and he asked them to walk away from what they were doing. And they did. They walked away from the old meaning and purpose of their lives to follow him. And as they followed, something happened to them. He began to teach them things about what their lives meant, about what they were for. He said things like "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek . . . and those who hunger and thirst, and the merciful, and the pure in heart, and the peacemakers, and the persecuted." He told them things like, "You are the salt of the earth... and the light of the world." He taught them about life's purpose, teaching them that the greatest commandment they will ever have is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself." And he left them with a purpose: "Just as the Father has sent me, so I send you." He passed his life's purpose and mission and ministry on to those who would follow. There was a moment in the lives of those who followed him when it seemed like the new meaning and purpose that Jesus had given them was lost. He was arrested and crucified among criminals, and those who followed him deserted him. But then, of course, came the glorious morning of resurrection, that moment in which all that Jesus said, and did, and taught was vindicated and commended to all whom he would claim as his own. This is why Paul, in his letter to the Christians in Rome, says, "We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." That is to say, the tired old things that we use to fill our days in search of meaning are hollow, useless, and dead.

¹ See Michael Linvall, *The Christian Life: A Geography of God*, p. 116.

Instead, Jesus gives us a radically new definition of the purpose and meaning of human life, and shows us that all meaning and purpose is a give from God. The meaning of life is something you are given apparently when you stop trying to earn it or accomplish it for yourself, and instead give yourself to God's concerns for human life, God's agenda, which Jesus calls the "Kingdom of God". The meaning of life looks a lot like what Jesus did: caring for and loving others, becoming poor in spirit, sharing the burden of others, particularly their mourning. The meaning of life was given to us by God, taught to us by Jesus Christ, and shared with us in the resurrection. In that incredible moment in which death became life, all the other stuff of life was reoriented around God, and around neighbor. That's the meaning of life. To love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, to love your neighbor as you love yourself. It is to be united with Christ in resurrection - new life.

Let me go back to our religious wanderer friend for a moment. You may have wondered which road he ended up choosing, and the truth is that we don't know. The cartoon didn't say. But you know, if he's a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, he'll know that the path promising to reveal the meaning of life is a misguided one. He'll know that the meaning of life is nothing that he can find on his own. If he's a Christian, he'll already know the meaning and purpose that God has given him. He'll walk the road with mission and purpose: to love God and to love neighbor. And he'll head for the cheese and crackers, where other wanderers will be gathered to eat, and to share, and to love.

And *that* is what it's all about.

Thanks be to God. Amen.