

“The Bread of Life for You”

Matthew 4:1-11

What is your purpose in life? What is your heart's deepest desire? I hope that you will ponder this question more than just once in your life because this is one of those holy questions that help us focus our attention on what is important in life.

In his book *The Inward Journey*, Howard Thurman writes, “There is nothing more exhausting for the person than the constant awareness that his [her] life is being lived at cross-purposes. At such moments the individual seems to himself [herself] ever to be working against himself [herself]. What he [she] longs for is the energy that comes from a concentration of his [her] forces in a single direction, toward a single end.”

A traveler came upon a group of three hard-at-work stonemasons, and asked each in turn what he was doing. The first one who looked very tired and disinterested in his work said, “I am sanding down this block of marble.” The second one who seemed to have more energy for his job said, “I am preparing a foundation.” The third beamed with joy and said, “I am building a cathedral.” Purpose and meaning can make an incredible difference in how we view our lives. In a book called, *Healing the Purpose of Your Life*, Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn write that, “Burnout comes not from doing too many things, but from doing things that are not meaningful to us.”

This question about our purpose in life was one that Jesus himself faced just as he was beginning his ministry. In our story today from Matthew 4 we see him going out into the wilderness to be tested or prepared for ministry. Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness which is a reminder to us of the work of God with the people of Israel as they were led out of slavery in Egypt through the waters to the be prepared for 40 years. Jesus after getting out of the water of baptism also spends 40 days being prepared and tested. 40 is usually a number used in the Bible many times to indicate a long period of time. During their time in the wilderness the people of Israel had to learn to rely on God for their food, shelter and basically everything in life. Their preparation was about learning how to find their vocation, their mission in life through their relationship with God. “Forty days” also reminds us of Moses and the prophet Elijah, both of whom also fasted for forty days as they prepared for their roles as God's agents to Israel. In the same way we find Jesus being prepared for his mission and ministry through a time in the wilderness where he had to make a choice about his center in life. What is going to feed him and sustain him on his journey in ministry? Is it the powers of the world or the love of God? In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus is presented as the obedient Son of God, the one with whom God is well pleased. Unlike Israel who was disobedient to God, Jesus never failed in his life to always know what was important to him.

Have you intentionally spent time in the wilderness (whatever that maybe for each of us) to discover the purpose of your life? Do you take the time every now and then to focus on the deepest desire of your heart that God planted within you? What sustains you on the journey? What feeds your souls? What helps you stay grounded and centered? Temptation is part of our life. Life is meant to frustrate us. What sets you free from the temptations/illusions of power, security and esteem?

In his book, *In the Name of Jesus*, Henri Nouwen, the late Dutch Roman Catholic spiritual writer, identified three temptations for Christians that relate to the three temptations of Jesus. They are:

(1) The temptation to be relevant (stones to bread.) Nouwen moved from 20 years of teaching at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard to live and work with the mentally and physically handicapped who could not read and knew nothing of his accomplishments. The result was, as he described it, “These broken, wounded and completely unpretentious people force me to let go of my relevant self -- the self that can do things, ...proves things, builds things ...” He found himself completely vulnerable and “open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments....I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be

completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self." What matters is that "God has created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim that love is the true source of all human life."

(2) The temptation to be spectacular (throw oneself down from the tower.) Nouwen describes this temptation as the pressure to do something that will win great applause. Stardom and individual heroism are, he feels, aspects of our competitive society pervasive in the church. Nouwen affirms that we church leaders are "sinful, broken, vulnerable people who need as much care as anyone we care for."

(3) The temptation to be powerful (kingdoms of this world) As a university professor, Nouwen had been "in charge" and a powerful person. Among the handicapped, it was different. He writes: "One of the greatest ironies of the history of Christianity is that its' leaders constantly gave in to the temptation for power -- political power, military power, economic power, moral and spiritual power." It is easier to control people than to love them, he found. But our task is to empty ourselves and follow Jesus. The way of power is chosen, he writes, "When intimacy is a threat... Many Christian empire builders have been people unable to give and receive love." Our temptation is to settle for our lower selves, for the roles we play in life, for the surface stuff of power, and to forget about our vocation in life. What feeds your soul? What is the bread of life for you? How do you receive it? Do you come to the table of Christ often or is it just a dessert kind of bread that you eat to make yourself feel better? Throughout the years, I have learned to come to the table to receive the bread of life through silence, relationships and giving. Every year as we look at stewardship and our financial and commitment to the church, it is important for me to ask if I am growing in my generosity and my trust in God. Am I able to let go a little more of my grip on the illusion of power and social status?

The power of this bread of life is so transformative for our lives. It does not make us great by the standards of our society, but it brings us closer to the heart of God to be the saints who are called to love and serve the world. This bread of life is about living every day while knowing that we are loved beyond measure. We don't have to prove anything to anyone! Imagine if the whole world woke up to this realization! What a tremendous difference this would make! Dr. Robert Coles who is an American author, child psychiatrist, and professor at Harvard University told the story about his first meeting with Dorothy Day who was someone who knew about the power of the bread of life to transform her life to serve others. Dr. Coles says, "She was sitting at a table, talking with a woman who was, I quickly realized, quite drunk, yet determined to carry on a conversation. The woman... had a large purple-red birthmark along the right side of her forehead. She kept touching it as she uttered one exclamatory remark after another, none of which seemed to get the slightest rise from the person sitting opposite her. I found myself increasingly confused by what seemed to be an interminable, essentially absurd exchange taking place between the two middle-aged women. When would it end- the alcoholic ranting and the silent nodding, occasionally interrupted by a brief question, which only served, maddeningly, to wind up the already over-talkative one rather than wind her down? Finally silence fell upon the room. Dorothy Day asked the woman if she would mind an interruption. She got up and came over to me. She said, 'Are you waiting to talk to one of us?' *One of us*: with those three words she had cut through layers of self-importance, a lifetime of bourgeois privilege, and scraped the hard bone of pride: 'Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.' With those three words, so quietly and politely spoken, she had indirectly told me what [her movement] the Catholic Worker Movement is all about and what she herself was like."

What is your heart's deepest desire? What is the bread of life for you? Amen.