

“The Search for Meaning”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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**Text: “Vanity of vanity, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities. All is vanity.”
(Ecclesiastes 1:2)**

This past year my daughter Lucy, who teaches English at St. Stephen’s /St. Agnes in Alexandria, Virginia taught a course for seniors entitled “The Loss of Faith.” In this course, the students were asked to read some of the great works of literature: Homer’s *Odyssey*, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, and Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness*. The students were also required to read some more contemporary literature including J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, as well as to view a number of films including “The Graduate” and “American Beauty.” The theme that ran through these literary works and movies was the theme of the search for meaning. Each of these works in some fashion presents the human search to find meaning in life, oftentimes involving individuals in loss of faith in order to recover it.

In this week’s *New York Times*, David Brooks poses the same question in a somewhat different way. For him a fundamental question for all of us is not “what we ask of life” but what “life asks of us.” Brooks contrasts the deep individualism of our modern culture over against a more traditional culture that sought the good of the whole. In other words, which is the more important question: “What do I ask of life?” or “What does life ask of me?”

I.

The text for this morning is taken from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. At first glance it often seems strange that this book is part of our Bible. The theme of the book is stated in our text. “Vanity of vanity,” says the Preacher, “All is vanity.”

The word for “vanity” in the Hebrew Bible is “Hebel” which means “wind,” “breath,” or “vapor.” That is how Ecclesiastes views life. It is all like the wind. “There is nothing new under the sun,” Ecclesiastes goes on to say. “What has been is what will be.” “All rivers,” he notes, “flow to the sea and yet the sea is not full.”

Ecclesiastes, along with the book of Job and Proverbs, is part of the Wisdom Literature. There are really two very distinct faces of wisdom. One is very predictable. The Book of Proverbs, for the most part, contains elements of wisdom that are built on common sense, experience, and a belief that the world makes sense.

“A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches and favor better than silver or gold.” (Proverbs 22:1)

“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (Proverb 15:1)

In each of these sayings is a belief that life makes sense, and that if a person will do what is right, that person will prosper and be successful.

But, there is another voice in the Wisdom books of the Old Testament that is very different from that of Proverbs. Both Job and Ecclesiastes rebel against the notion that life is orderly, purposeful, and meaningful. For Job, the problem is the question of why the innocent suffer. If God is great and good, asks Job, then why is there so much suffering in the world?

For Ecclesiastes, the problem is framed somewhat differently. The book is written from the perspective of King Solomon, one of the great kings of Israel. He has all wealth and power in his possession. And yet he cannot make sense of life. The book is an account of the King’s search for meaning. He acquires wisdom but it brings only vexation. He tries pleasure but it too is empty. He looks to his work but finds that that too fails him. In the end it is all vanity.

Some people have worried that a book such as Ecclesiastes is part of our Bible. They say it is too dark, too depressing, and too negative. But in many ways it raises one of the most important questions that all of us will have to deal with – the question of the meaning of our lives.

Today, we are living in a very difficult time. The economic recession that is a dominant part of our lives today has turned our world upside down. Suddenly, people are fearful in ways that would have been unimaginable in Charlotte just a few months ago. They are afraid for their jobs, afraid for their future, afraid of what will happen to their children. In times like these, each one of us need to examine his or her life and ask one simple question: what does life ask of us?

II.

In the first place, we need to look at our faith. What kind of faith do we have? One of the lessons that the Book of Ecclesiastes puts before us is the mystery of life.

This acknowledgement of the mystery of life disturbs some people. To be sure, the Bible speaks with confidence, certainty, and finality. And yet, when we open the pages of Scripture, we see that there is much that is left unanswered.

“Can you by searching find out God?
Can you find out the Almighty unto perfect?
It is high as heaven: what can you do?

Deeper than Sheol; what can you know?"

That is the Bible.

"Righteous art thou, O God, when I contend with you. Yet would I reason the cause with you and why does the way of the wicked prosper?"

That is the Bible.

"My God, My God, why have thou forsaken me?"

That is the Bible.

"Now we see through a mirror dimly."

That is the Bible.

Whenever we speak of the search for meaning, we acknowledge that we do not have all the answers. The Prophet Isaiah reminds us that "God's ways are not our ways and his thoughts not our thoughts."

The search for meaning always begins with the words of the father of the boy that Jesus healed, who said, "I believe. Help my unbelief."

III.

There is a second dimension to the search for meaning and it has to do with our moral loyalties? Much of the financial disaster of the subprime crisis is rooted in two fundamental problems: greed and dishonesty. Over the past week we have all watched in disbelief as people who were once thought to be financial or political wizards have been discredited by poor judgment and ethics. One thinks immediately of Bernie Madoff, who was believed to be a financial wizard until it was revealed that he had lost fifty billion dollars of his investor's money through a Ponzi scheme. This past week the Senate of the State of Illinois voted unanimously to remove the Governor of Illinois from office for trying to sell the vacant seat in the United States Senate.

In these times we need to ask ourselves what makes for greatness? Is it wealth, power, or prestige? Some people achieve greatness by great deeds of power. Around the year 1400 A.D., there was a Tartar emperor named Tamerlane who swept across Asia conquering lands and people in an unprecedented way. Many viewed him as one of the greatest warriors of all times. At the same time a boy was born in Mainz, Germany who soon would be experimenting with something that no one had ever imagined – a printing press with movable type that would revolutionize the way that books were produced. That young man was Johann Gutenberg and his printing press revolutionized the world. Suddenly books, which had hitherto for been only the property of the very wealthy, became available to common people.

This is a challenge that none of us can fully evade. The smallest of us can stand for the greatest things. A lantern can represent the same cause of light that the sun stands for, and in its own corner of the world a lantern can often do what the sun could never do.

IV.

A third dimension of this search for religion has to do with our religious life. For a lot of people today, religion is a turn off. A recent Gallop poll revealed that a majority of people in this country don't trust religious institutions.

The reasons for this are not too hard to find. Many of the major denominations are divided today by issues around homosexuality and abortion. Often ministers and other religious leaders let down their followers by actions that are selfish or corrupt.

The *Charlotte Observer* had an article in it recently about a minister in our community who pastors one of the fast growing churches in our community. The article was about the minister's wardrobe. He spoke of designer blue jeans and shirts – some of which cost hundreds of dollars. All of this was to appeal to a younger, hipper audience that prefers casual dress. When I read the article, I smiled, thinking about the black robes that most Presbyterian ministers wear. Not much of a fashion statement really – but then again – that is the point. It is a reminder to all of us that in worship, the focus is not on individuals, but on God.

In the reading room of the library of Princeton Seminary, there are a number of portraits that line the wall, representing some of the most outstanding graduates of that institution. One of them that has always intrigued me is the portrait of a Japanese Christian, Toyohito Kagawa. As a young man, he studied at Princeton before returning to his native Japan. Kagawa was born to a very wealthy family. But as a young man, he forswore that wealth and lived in the slums of Tokyo. In the years following the devastation of World War II, he became one of the most important people in his country, leading his people beyond destruction to recovery.

Toward the end of his life he was invited back to the Seminary to speak at Miller Chapel. By then his health had failed him. His eyesight was gone and he was bent over and crippled. After his speech, as two of the students were leaving, one of them said to the other, "He didn't have much to say, did he?" A woman, who overheard them interrupted them to say, "A man on a cross doesn't have to say much."

You see, the important question is not what we ask of life but what life asks of us.

So what are you standing for in religion? For myself, I would hope to stand for Jesus Christ as the one who for me is the way, the truth, and the life.

Someone once asked the painter Whistler to help in hanging a new and beautiful painting in a room. The man complained to the artist that he couldn't make the painting fit the room. Whistler, looking over the situation, said, "My friend, you are beginning at the wrong end. You can't make the painting fit the room. You have to make the room fit the painting."

So we too will have to quit trying to make Christ accommodate our lives and strive to make our lives accommodate him. Once we put Christ over against our private morals, our disintegrating family life, our economic systems, and our international situation, we will soon see that he will not fit the room. The room will have to be changed to fit him.

And when that occurs, something dramatic will happen and the meaning that so often has eluded us will suddenly be much closer at hand.

Amen!