

Whose Life is it, Anyway?

13 August 2006

Bible passage: **Galatians 6:4-5** (The Message)

“Make a careful exploration of who you are, and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don’t be impressed with yourself. Don’t compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.”

Sermon nugget: The key to “doing the creative best” we can with our own life is to know ourselves, and to live in accord with our strengths, skills, passions and interests, and not to live as someone else would have us live.

Several years ago, I attended a Lori Beth Jones seminar on writing our personal mission statement that included trying to live the life that God intends us to live. I was sitting next to a colleague in ministry, and heard him respond with amazement when Jones said to us that many of us do not live our own lives. Instead, she said, we try to live the unfulfilled dreams of our parents.

He was absolutely astounded by that statement, and leaned over to me and said; “Now I understand why my life has always been so confused. My mother wanted me to be a business person, and my father always wanted me to be a minister.” You see, he had spent a good portion of his life up to that point bouncing back and forth between the business world, and the ministry, and in that moment, he had come face-to-face with a key question about his life: “Whose life was he living? His? Or the one his parents had dreamed for him?”

It occurs to me that my friend is not the only person who has ever faced this dilemma. I often hear stories of sons and daughters whose parents have carved out a place for them in the family business, and they feel caught when they come to the realization, if they do, that the business isn’t what they want for their lives. How do they deal with their parents?

Or what about those infamous “stage parents” that we hear about? Are the parents actually frustrated actors or actresses, singers or performers, who are trying to push their kids to live out the dreams they were never able to realize on their own? And it’s not just theater or performing arenas where we see this; it’s evident in athletics, and well, I guess virtually every field that exists. Whenever parents or other significant persons in our lives refuse to “allow” us to be our own person, to follow our own dreams and walk our own path, then we start down the road of being in someone else’s life and not ours.

It’s like a part of the storyline that I recall from the movie, *Dead Poet’s Society*. One young student loved the theater, and was really talented. He wanted to be an actor; that was his passion, his lifeblood. However, life as an

actor for not acceptable to his father, and he was forbidden from ever performing. The story ends quite tragically, as the father never accepts the young man, and denies what he wants for his life.

I would guess that many of us can identify with some of these scenarios, although they may not be as dramatic as the *Dead Poet’s Society* story. Many of us have spent, and maybe even continue to spend, a lot of our time and energy trying to get the approval of one person or another, and often we do that by trying to be the person they have envisioned us to be. Sometimes that fits, and sometimes, it doesn’t.

We often work really hard trying to live up to someone else’s expectations of us and of the life we should be living, and sometimes we just go along and don’t rock the boat. Then there are times that the whole situation becomes untenable, and we make a break and try to move on, but typically that only happens with a lot of pain and heartache and disappointment.

It seems to me that the Bible passage we have for this morning really addresses these kinds of situations. Our version from *The Message* reads this way: “**Make a careful exploration of who you are, and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don’t be impressed with yourself. Don’t compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.**”

Paul is the writer of this passage, and this section reflects a theme that we find throughout the book of Galatians. You see, Paul’s personal experience was that God was not some impersonal force who tries to make people behave in a certain way, especially in terms of how a person was to be faithful. Rather, God was more of a personal savior, whom Paul experienced through Jesus, who sets us free to live our own lives. Paul was convinced that God wants us to be ourselves, and to be ourselves fully and completely is how we are faithful. It is an inner freedom.

I’d say it is more like the title of that old children’s book, *Free to Be You and Me*. We are created as unique children of God, and God wants us to live out that uniqueness, to be who we are, not who someone else is, or who someone wants us to be. Frankly, when we follow someone else’s formula for the kind of person we’re to be or the kind of life we’re to live, we’re not being ourselves. The only way we come close to being who we’re meant to be comes in the process of getting to know ourselves, and then living more true to and aligned with the person we come to know.

I really think that’s what the first part of our Bible passage is trying to tell us. Again, it says: “**Make a careful exploration of who you are...Don’t compare**

yourselves with others." We have to be intentional about getting to know ourselves, and that doesn't mean enumerating all the ways in which we're better or worse, smarter, or not as smart, as someone else. It means determining who we are, what we're like, what the driving force in our lives really is.

That's what it means to be a faithful person, to be on a spiritual journey—it's a journey to discover who we are, and then being who that is. As Richard Rohr put it, **"Spiritual life is a matter of becoming who you truly are. It's not becoming Catherine of Siena, or some other saint, but who you are. It sounds easy enough, but being who you truly are is work, courage and faith."**

Someone else has phrased it a different way with these words: **"Success is the progressive realization of all that you were meant to be and do."** It is a lifelong process of clearing away all the layers until we understand ourselves, know who we really are, and live true to that understanding.

The sadness that many of us experience in life, I think, comes from the fact that few, if any, of us actually come to know ourselves completely. And in not knowing ourselves, we fail to live as the persons we are created to be. As Oliver Wendell Holmes was quoted as saying, **"The greatest tragedy is the waste of human resources. The average person goes to his grave with his music still in him."** I would even add that many of us go to our grave having tried valiantly to play someone else's music, never having found our own.

I don't believe that's the way God wants us to live; God wants us to hear our own music, and to live in harmony with it. That's why God has created each of us with talents and skills and possibilities and strengths, and our lives are about discovering what those are, and then using them. That's what the Bible passage is talking about when it says to make a careful exploration of who we are and **"the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that."** When we know ourselves, our life's purpose will become clearer and more readily apparent. We can live a life of passion and energy and commitment when we know who we are and what we're about.

The Bible passage has one more gem of wisdom that we need to think about, and that is that our life is ours; it's not anyone else's. The writer Paul says, **"Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life."** How we live our lives is our own responsibility, not our parents', not our life partner's, not our kids', not our friends'...it is our responsibility. If we discover that we're actually trying to live out another person's story, we're the ones who have to take action and change things. No one else can do it, and it's not an easy thing to do. It will take work, courage and faith; we have to be able to step out, not knowing for sure what

we'll find, but I know God will bless the new adventure on which we embark.

I've come to believe that knowing who we are and living in tune with that is like being born all over again. It's like having a birthday. Dr. Seuss said it well in that magical little book, *Happy Birthday to You!*

**Today you are you! That's truer than true!
There is no one alive who is you-er than you!
Shout loud, "I am lucky to be what I am!
Thank goodness I'm not just a clam or a ham
Or a dusty old jar of sour gooseberry jam!
I am what I am! That's a great thing to be!
If I say so myself, Happy Birthday to Me!**

And we can say "Happy Birthday" because today is the day we can start living our own lives, not anybody's else's.

CLOSING:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we're ready for the brand new day we'll discover when we choose to be who we are. Are we ready for the this great adventure?

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace Amen.