

## Priorities

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

04 February 2024

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Isaiah 40:28-31

Mark 1:29-39

*“And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him,  
‘Everyone is searching for you.’”*

~ Mark 1:36-37

## Prayer

**Eternal God, amid the din and fury of our world in this New Year**

**Help us to be still in Your presence.**

**Open our minds and hearts to hear the Good News of our faith. Amen.**

The idea of striving for a purpose or discerning what to do with our life is of vital importance to our emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being. It doesn't matter whether you think of yourself as being wealthy or poor, successful or insignificant, famous or inconsequential, young or old, single or married, religious or not – all of us want to feel useful, wanted, appreciated, accepted, loved and have a real sense that we are making it in life, that we are getting somewhere of consequence. The great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote quite sagaciously in his book *“The Brothers Karamazov”* that ***“The secret of man's being is not only to live, but to live for something definite. Without a firm notion of what he is living for, man will not accept life and will rather destroy himself than remain on earth.”***<sup>i</sup> And surely enough there comes a day, a time, a moment to all of us when we have to set out on a journey in search of that ***“something definite”*** that will allow us to claim our own identity, to find a goal to pursue and to develop that much needed awareness that our life counts and matters.

Frederick Buechner, who was a Presbyterian minister turned writer, said that at its core human life is a story of searching and he spoke of this journey every person goes on as a ***“journey in search.”*** During the span of our years on earth, we all search for a good self to be and meaningful work to do. We search for other selves to love that, hopefully, will love us back. We search for happiness and fulfillment. We search for acceptance and respect. We search to become human in a world that tempts us always to be less than human or looks to us to be more. In a world where it is often hard to believe in much of anything, we search to believe in something holy and beautiful and life-transcending that will give meaning and purpose to the lives we live. And we all search for God.<sup>ii</sup> For as Saint Augustine penned in his Confessions, ***“our hearts are restless until they find peace [in God].”***<sup>iii</sup>

Sometimes though, we get lost in our search to become whole and at peace inside our own skin. Our priorities get out of sync with what gives real meaning to human life, and we throw ourselves at endless pursuits of substitutes for that “**something definite**,” which we can only find when we have the courage to look deep within our own hearts; because if God is to be found anywhere, it is certainly within each one of us. Still, most of us remain captive to the creed of a global culture that insists on making humanity believe our Self-worth is indissolubly tied to the world outside ourselves. So, we focus all our energy and efforts on how long we can live and stay young and attractive, how much money we can make, how powerful and important we can become, how successful we are, what college or university we attended, and how far ahead of others we can get. To keep up with the demands of this ambitious, competitive, and materialistic lifestyle, we end up overlooking one big truth about human existence: the length of our lives or how much we accomplish are not the most relevant part of our journey here on earth; it is the depth of our understanding of life’s true meaning that counts in the end.

The people of ancient Israel had to wrestle with the whole theological and existential question about what was their “**something definite**” to live for when they were forced into exile in Babylon. Former glories lay in ruins back in the promised land. Without having any say or choice in it, they had to live in the country of the dreaded enemy away from the land that gave them their identity as a nation. Everything they believed, everything they had worked for, everything they had hoped for, everything they thought was unshakeable in their lives, everything that looked permanent, everything that gave them direction and a sense of selfhood appeared to have been taken away. In a moment of anguish and despair, they began to ask themselves, “***Is [our] way hidden from the Lord, and [our] right disregarded by my God?***”<sup>iv</sup>

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where everything you had worked very hard to build, everything that gave you that sense that life is good and worth living, all of a sudden, started crumbling to pieces and there was absolutely nothing you could do to stop it, to hold it all together? Have you ever felt that you had found that “**something definite**” – the job of your dreams, a beautiful home, a spouse you couldn’t imagine living without, the nearly perfect life – and inexplicably you could not keep any of it. The more you tried to hold on to it, the more that something that looked so right, so good, so perfect got away from you just like when you try to hold sand in your hands and the more you squeeze it the faster it runs through your fingers?

It is often in those moments when our confidence in the outside world is shattered, when our worldview is shaken by the unexpected turns of life, when we are stricken by a sudden loss, by an incurable disease, by the reality that we cannot have it all and the only thing we are left with is our self and nothing else that, sometimes, some of us pause to think about what really matters in life and we rethink our priorities. And it is also in those raw moments of confinement with our aloneness, with our humanness,

that we begin to wonder if God's Spirit is there, anywhere near, to help us find our way back to the journey toward a purposeful life and toward the Ground of our being.

And what a difference does it make when we are at our lowest, when things go awry, when we do not know what to do with our life and someone comes along who cares enough to be willing to help us find the way back to ourselves and to God! The greatest gift we can give another human being is to listen to them when they are lonely, to stand by them when they are hurting, to love them when they feel that everyone else deserted them, to accept them when they place their priorities in the wrong order and things fall apart, and to care enough to help them get back to the search for their humanity, for a deeper understanding of life and for God.

Last week, someone reminded me that the word "care" derives from the gothic word "kara," which means to participate in someone else's suffering, to share in another person's pain, to cry out with those who are unwell, confused, heartbroken, crestfallen, isolated and lost in their search for wholeness. The only way people who are hurting, grappling with the question of what to live for, and searching for a new purpose can know that they are not alone on their journey is through another person who pays attention and takes the time to participate in their suffering intentionally while inviting them to remember that they are loved and their lives have intrinsic value and still matter regardless of the circumstances around them.

**"Everyone is searching for you,"** the disciples said to Jesus in today's Gospel reading. There is a reason why the whole city of Capernaum was so taken by Jesus of Nazareth, and it wasn't just for the fact that Jesus showed extraordinary powers to heal them. Jesus took the time to pay attention. He noticed their real physical and spiritual needs and did not shrink away. Jesus showed compassion for those people who were restless, sick, and unsure of whether their lives had any goal or purpose at all. He understood their very human yearning to be treated, respected, cured, and loved as human beings even though their lives were not perfect, filled with "instagrammable moments." Jesus knew those people were searching for something to go on living for and he cared about their whole being: body, mind, and soul.

The Gospel of Mark provides a beautiful picture of Jesus' caring ministry. When Jesus walked into Simon Peter's house and found out that Simon's mother-in-law was ill, Mark says that Jesus came near, that's the best translation of the Greek verb – Jesus drew near to the febrile woman. He got close enough to take hold of her hand and then our translation of the passage says that Jesus lifted her up. In the original Greek though, the evangelist uses the same verb that describes Jesus' resurrection. You all know well that Easter proclamation, **"He has been raised; he is not here."**<sup>v</sup> Mark makes the mind-blowing claim that Jesus did more than lift Peter's mother-in-law up; Jesus raised her up. The unnamed woman got up and, immediately, began to serve not because that was a woman's role in her society, but because she found a bigger purpose for her life in her work, in her renewed sense of what mattered in her life. She

had been cared for and now she was making it a priority to care in tangible and palpable ways for those around her. Jesus had given her a new opportunity to embrace her Self-worth and now Peter's mother-in-law was showing that she was ready to make something of her life by caring for and about others. When Jesus raised her up, she came into a fresh and new understanding of life's meaning and she started living not just for herself but for others as well.

Frederick Buechner once said that we too have it in us to be “**messiahs**” to one another. Those of us who follow Jesus Christ – our Messiah - also have it in us to love as Jesus loved, to approach people and care for them and raise people up as Jesus did. As followers of Christ, it is our priority and purpose to help people find something definite to live for, the path toward their Self-worth and to invite them to draw closer to God who imbues our “***journey in search***” with direction and life-saving meaning.

Humanity still needs to hear this message. In a world where people are weary and fainting as they try to keep up with the exhausting demands of life, it is crucial that the Church continues to proclaim that there is a much better way to be human, to find that ‘***something definite***,’ and to prioritize what to live for. May you and I never stop caring enough to pay attention to those around us who are lost in their search for purpose and meaning. May we always care enough to say to our weary world, “***those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.***” Indeed, they shall become messiahs to one another, setting people's priorities straight so we all may be raised up to that full life of caring that is real, fulfilling, joyful, and purposeful from the inside out.

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokbony in The Brothers Karamazov, p. 247.

<sup>ii</sup> Adapted from two sources by Frederick Buechner: The Longing for Home, p. 67 [Kindle edition] and Listening to Your Life, p. 141 [Kindle edition].

<sup>iii</sup> Adapted from Confessions of S. Augustine, Book 1, Chapter 1, A 1, p. 39.

<sup>iv</sup> Isaiah 40:27.

<sup>v</sup> Mark 16:6.