

We Are What He Has Made Us

I was listening to an interview with a psychotherapist on the radio a while back. He was hypothesizing about what drives human beings at various ages. He particularly mentioned that at a certain age, we have a strong need to know that the work we do matters, and at another age, we want to know that we ourselves are significant, not for the work we do, but just for being who we are.

Perhaps we need to hear what Mr. Rogers taught *later* in life rather than *earlier*.

He added that most unhappiness comes from our lives getting out of sync with our emotional development.

I have no idea whether that is true or not. I didn't catch the name of the therapist in the interview, and I got to the parking garage before it was over.

However, I did find myself reflecting on what he said later.

It put me in mind of a story Tom Long shared a while back, after his fortieth birthday. After waxing poetical about what a watershed moment it can be, of the epiphanies that surface regarding boundless youth and bottomless energy and the "Full physical," Tom said this, "A few days later, I was looking in the yellow pages in the local Princeton telephone directory, and I noticed an advertisement there I hadn't seen before. It was from the medical society of Princeton and it offered a free taped medical information program. (You can tell how along ago this was.)

You simply call this number, tell them what tape you wanted to listen to, and they play it over the telephone. They had several dozen tapes there on exercise, heart disease, smoking, jogging, and so on. I was browsing through those and I saw one entitled... *The Fears of a Man Over Forty*.

I dialed the number.

A very pleasant woman answered the telephone and I was about to tell her what I wanted when suddenly I recognized that my wife was within earshot in the next room. I didn't want her to hear what I was asking for, lest she think that I was worrying too much about myself, so I lowered my voice to a whisper and said, 'I want to hear about the fears of a man over forty.'

She hung up.

At first, I was irritated that I didn't hear my tape, but then I thought, 'Maybe that is the tape

of the fears of a man over forty.”¹

At every age, we need to know that what we are doing is important.

At every age, we need to know that there is significance beyond the physical matter of our being.

In other words, we need to know that we matter.

The epistle to the Ephesians is, in some ways, a rather odd book of the Bible. There is not a really obvious reason why it was written. It is full of wonderful wisdom, but scholars tend to think that it was more generally like an open letter to the church rather than particular in its claims. We are not really even a hundred percent sure who wrote it, but it does contain some rather important reflections.

One reflection might be *where do we find our significance?*

In this second chapter, the author juxtaposes one way of life – in which the manner of life is dictated by pleasure and acquisition, ruled by *desires of the flesh and senses* – with another way of life.

The second way of life is characterized, “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.”

On the one hand, *desires of the flesh and senses* and on the other hand, *alive together with Christ*.

It seems a clear choice, doesn't it?

Flesh and senses are fleeting, Christ is not, rhetorical flourish completed.

Such a life could even lend itself to a certain amount of smugness, couldn't it?

There is a reason why in the third century all of those ascetics went out into the desert to flagellate themselves – they were looking for clear practices to mark *faithfulness*.

One of them stood on a column for something like 37 years, I think.

There is something very appealing about believing that what we're doing is the right thing, and that by doing the right thing, our lives take on significance.

But the author continues, and takes on any smugness that may come from self-satisfaction.

“By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

The grace of God is a free gift.

It is the most significant gift any of us receive.

¹ Long, Thomas. *Joy in the House*. Preached at Princeton Theological Seminary, July 5, 1987

But it sure is tempting to get pulled off into chasing something else, perhaps the desires of the flesh and senses?

I love this story that the late Fred Craddock told:

“I was in a home not long ago where they’d adopted a dog that had been a racer. It was a big old greyhound, spotted hound, lying there in the den. One of the kids in the family, just a toddler, was pulling on its tail, and a little older kid had his head over on that old dog’s stomach, used it for a pillow. That dog just seemed so happy, and I said to the dog, ‘Uh, are you still racing any?’

‘No, no, no, I don’t race anymore.’

I said, ‘Do you miss the glitter and excitement of the track?’

He said, ‘No, no.’

I said, ‘Well, what’s the matter? You got too old?’

‘No, no, I still had some race in me.’

‘Well, did you not win?’

He said, ‘I won over a million dollars for my owner.’

‘Then what was it, bad treatment?’

‘Oh no, they treated us royally when we were racing.’

‘Then what, did you get crippled?’

He said, ‘No, no, no.’

I said, ‘Then what?’

And he said, ‘I quit.’

‘You quit?’

Yeah, that’s what he said. ‘I quit.’

I said, ‘Why did you quit?’

And he said, ‘I discovered that what I was chasing was not really a rabbit. And I quit.’ He looked at me and said, ‘All that running, running, running, running, and what I was chasing, not even real.’”²

The letter to the Ephesians is not about making ourselves significant. We had that the minute God formed us out of the dust into God’s own image.

² Craddock, Fred. Craddock Stories, Graves and Ward, eds. (St. Louis, Chalice, 2001) p107

It's not even about salvation; God has done that too.

It is about a way of life that reflects God.

It is about a way of life that reflects the image of God imprinted on us and renewed in Jesus Christ.

We are called into life in Christ.

Do you often think of yourself as being made for good works?

I try to be a kind person, I expect most of you do too, but I don't go through life paying very close attention to whether or not I am engaged in good works.

Maybe that's shocking to hear your pastor say, but I really don't obsess over it.

I do think about the teachings of Jesus quite a bit, though.

I do think of the things that he thought were important – kindness to strangers, the richness of God's mercy, and I hope that means that I live that out a bit. I hope that means that maybe the image of God gets reflected in me just a little bit – maybe you feel the same way?

Listen to this from Elton Trueblood:

"I remember a word a man said long ago – a word which deepened my life immeasurably – and I go to him in gratitude, but he has absolutely no memory of the word or incident. This is as it should be. In a group of twenty-five lay Christians meeting recently, each told what was the major influence which had helped him to move over from nominal Christianity to a committed faith. Every one of the twenty-five mentioned *a person*. Not one mentioned a public occasion. And the surprising part was that all of the persons mentioned as thus effective in personal ministry were inconspicuous. Most of them had made a significant witness without knowing it."³

What we're really talking about, in church-speak is *witness*.

Conspicuous witness we understand. That's plunking a building down at the corner of 21st and Walnut. It is unmistakable. Our building alone says something about the faithfulness of this congregation, century after century.

But, at baptism, that witness gets *personal*.

In this moment, we are recommitting to generation after generation after generation of *inconspicuous witness*: Simply living into the fullness of what God has made you to be.

"We are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

³ Trueblood, Elton. *The Company of the Committed*. (Harper and Row, NY 1961) pp64-65

In the richness of God's mercy, we are joined to life in Christ.

That is our significance.

That is our source of meaning.

That is our reason for being as a church.

Which is why we don't chase rabbits, we follow the savior, even to Jerusalem, even to the cross, even to the cold tomb, in sure and certain hope that resurrection will follow.

All our significance and our value come from God, who has joined us to Christ Jesus and seated us in the heavenly places so that in the ages to come God might show immeasurable riches of grace and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

We are what God has made us, created for good works.

Made in God's image, we are given vocation to be alive in Christ, to know the source of our significance.

From *that* comes value, beyond the words we have to describe it, because it is the value that *God* places on us.

Remember that.

Let me give you a bit more of that quote I put in this month's *Messenger* from Frederick Buechner:

"I DISCOVERED THAT IF you really keep your eye peeled to it and your ears open, if you really pay attention to it, even such a limited and limiting life as the one I was living on Rupert Mountain opened up onto extraordinary vistas. Taking your children to school and kissing your wife goodbye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day's work. Hearing the rain patter against the window. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly. . . . If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."⁴

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

⁴ Buechner, Frederick. *Now and Then* (Harper and Row, New York, 1983) p