



Even though it was common among members of my generation, I never went “in search of myself.” The Baby Boomer generation was the first generation to go in search of themselves on a large scale. I suspect this was true largely because we were the first generation that could afford to do so, as we were the first generation to be raised in relative affluence. The search for ourselves was, in reality, a search for meaning. In the years since my generation began searching for themselves, every succeeding generation has created some form of the same search, to the point that multitudes of people are searching for meaning in their lives.

This morning we continue the series of messages *What Is It About Jesus*, as we come to the topic of *Meaning*. For our Scripture text we will read about the calling of some of the first disciples. We are most familiar with the version found in Matthew 4:18-22 (**18** *As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 19 “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” 20 At once they left their nets and followed him. 21 Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, 22 and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him*) but I tend to favor the version from John’s gospel.

Follow along as I read our Scripture text for the morning, from John 1:35-45 –

35 *The next day John was there again with two of his disciples.*

36 *When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!”*

37 *When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus.*

38 *Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?” They said, “Rabbi” (which means “Teacher”), “where are you staying?”*

39 *“Come,” he replied, “and you will see.”*

So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon.

40 *Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus.*

41 *The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ).*

42 *And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which, when translated, is Peter).*

43 The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

44 Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida.

45 Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

I like that telling of the story of the calling of the first disciples because of what we read in verse 41 – *the first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "we have found the Messiah."* After meeting Jesus, the first thing Andrew did was go and tell his brother. Andrew found Jesus, bringing him a sense of meaning to his life, and in his excitement his desire was to tell others.

As I have been doing in the weeks of this series, this morning I will speak about *meaning* through three words. Those words are *belonging*, *purpose*, and *value*. Those words represent what I believe to be absolute essentials in the life of every person. Each of us needs to *belong* somewhere. Each of us needs to have a sense of *purpose* in life. Each of us needs to know that we are of *value*. When any of those elements are missing from life there are difficulties. To feel as though we have nowhere to belong is devastating. To go through life with no sense of purpose robs much of life's joy. And to feel of no value is an incredibly damaging state of being, and we have all seen the tragic results in the lives of those who have believed they are of no value or because they have been told they are of no value.

One of the great blessings of faith, I believe, is its ability to fulfill all three of these needs. Through church we are given a place to belong. Through our calling from God we are given a sense of purpose. And the promise and realization of God's love certainly provides us with a sense of how we are so greatly valued.

Belonging

Perhaps you saw a recent survey that received quite a bit of attention in the news in recent days. A survey by the health insurer Cigna found that loneliness is widespread in America, with nearly 50 percent of respondents reporting that they feel alone or left out always or sometimes. Using one of the best-known tools for measuring loneliness — [the UCLA Loneliness Scale](#) (I found it fascinating to discover that such a tool existed)— Cigna surveyed 20,000 adults online across the country. Scores on the UCLA scale range from 20 to 80. People scoring 43 and above were considered lonely in the Cigna survey, with a higher score suggesting a greater level of loneliness and social isolation.

More than half of survey respondents — 54 percent — said they always or sometimes feel that no one knows them well. The survey also found that the average loneliness score in America is 44, which suggests that "most Americans are considered lonely," according to the report. The survey also found something surprising about loneliness in the younger generation. *Our survey found that actually the younger generation was lonelier than the older generations*, says Dr. Douglas Nemecek, the chief medical officer for behavioral health at Cigna. Members of Generation Z, born between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, had an overall loneliness score of 48.3. Millennials, just a little bit older, scored 45.3. By comparison, baby boomers scored 42.4. The Greatest Generation, people ages 72 and above, had a score of 38.6 on the loneliness scale.

https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/05/01/606588504/americans-are-a-lonely-lot-and-young-people-bear-the-heaviest-burden?utm_source=Fixed+Point+Foundation&utm_campaign=c7b33ab1e3-The+Intersect&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_7b195d4eb3-c7b33ab1e3-97482029&mc_cid=c7b33ab1e3&mc_eid=1280bb6228

I find that very interesting, as well as very troubling. Perhaps it is the nature of today's world that is driving a greater sense of loneliness. Perhaps it is the rise of the digital world and the accompanying decline of face-to-face interaction that contributes to loneliness. Whatever the cause, it is clear that many people struggle to find a sense of belonging. The reality is, even to be surrounded by people it is

still possible to feel both lonely and that you do not belong. You can be in a large room of people – such as this sanctuary – and feel alone. You can go to work in an office full of people and feel alone. There are many places where it is possible to be surrounded by people and yet feel alone.

There are many reasons why people will visit a church. Some people drive by a church and are attracted by the facility. Some people come to a church because they enjoy the music. Some people come to a church because they enjoy the preaching. Others come because of the programs, ministries, and outreach opportunities. People come to church for many reasons, but the reason that will keep people at a church is when they find it to be a place where they can belong. If people do not feel as if they belong in a church, they will not continue to attend there. When people feel as though they don't belong in our church, or that there is no place for them, I can't help but take that as a personal failure. It is a very hard pill for me to swallow to think there are people who come to our church and do not feel as though they can belong. If you attend our church and have been trying to figure out how to connect, and don't know how, talk to me about it. I want to help you connect with others here and help you to find a place to belong. I often worry that I'm rushing from place to place and unwittingly communicate an idea that I don't have time to talk with people, especially on Sunday mornings, but I will take time and talk with you and will do whatever I can to help you find a place to belong.

We are created to be in relationships with others. God did not create us to live solitary lives. I believe that Jesus called the disciples for a number of reasons, but one of those reasons was certainly to provide for a sense of belonging. Within that group of twelve, Jesus was providing a model of community that created a template for what it means to live in relationship with others and to be a part of a community that provides us with a sense of belonging.

Purpose

As I have said on more than one occasion, I have served vocationally as a minister for 37 years, but I've had other jobs as well. It's interesting how people sometimes respond when I tell them I'm a minister. Ministers are on the receiving end of a lot of jokes (and yes, that joke about *working one day a week* is one we have all heard, many, many times and don't need to hear it any more) about not having a "real" job, but I have had "real" jobs, some of them before entering ministry and some of them concurrent with and supplemental to ministry. One of my earlier vocational goals was to be a musician. How hard could that be, right? After all, Bachman-Turner Overdrive sang *get a second hand guitar, chances are you'll go far* (from the song *Takin' Care of Business*. Incidentally, that line is far from accurate. Chances are you *won't* go far). When I was completing my first semester of seminary I decided to give music a try and dropped out of school to do so and that's probably all I need to say about that embarrassingly failed effort. I know I don't need to talk about how impressed my future in-laws were with the idea. They were so impressed they moved to another state. But I found them and moved there. The only thing worse than making your own really bad vocational choice is letting yourself get down into someone else's bad vocational choice. A friend of mine talked me into going with him when he told his father he was dropping out of college to move to Nashville to try and make it in music. I can still see his father slowly lowering his newspaper and looking at my friend with shock, and then launching into a lecture that I did not need to hear.

One of the jobs I had while in seminary was with a cleaning service. Part of that job involved me being required to clean public restrooms, and let me just say that there is a part of life that you really have not experienced until you have worked a job cleaning public restrooms. Here is one of the things I learned from that job – someone has to clean public restrooms. In fact, someone has to do a lot of jobs that we cannot imagine doing, and may not be willing to do, and the people who do those jobs understand they are relegated to the bottom of the vocational ladder, and if you get a sense of your purpose from your vocation, as so many people do, that experience is tough to deal with, especially when it is communicated to you by society that you are on the bottom rung of the vocational ladder –

and thus of lesser value – because of your job. I began that cleaning job on a Thursday evening, working that night and Friday night before coming back on Monday. When I walked in on Monday evening the young lady who led our small cleaning crew was surprised to see me, saying she didn't think I would be back. She was in her late 20s, a single mom with several young children, and worked a couple of jobs to provide for her family. I asked her why she was surprised to see me. Her answer gave me quite a jolt, as she said, *because you're a seminary student. We get a lot of seminary students who take these jobs, work one or two nights, and then quit. And do you know why they quit? They quit because they think they're too good for this kind of work. Do you want to know how that makes me feel?* Well, I didn't need for her to tell me, as it was quite obvious how it made her feel.

We so strongly tie our sense of purpose to our vocation that we even think of God's will primarily in terms of vocation. Over the years, many people have asked me this question – *how can I discover God's will for my life?* Do you know what is almost always meant by that question? It's a variation of the same question, which is related to vocation – *what should be my vocation? Should I accept the job that was offered to me? Do you think I should consider the possibility of a new career?* This is just how we think, because our culture has ingrained in us the idea that we should see most of life through the lens of our vocation. We so often think of life through that lens of vocation, but do you know how often the Bible speaks about our vocation, especially in terms of God's will? Zero times. In fact, the only time that the Bible mentions an character's vocation is as a peripheral element to the story. We know that a few of the disciples were fishermen and one was a tax collector, but we don't know what the other disciples did for a living. We are told that Paul was a tentmaker, which was his livelihood (Acts 18:3 says *and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.* In Acts 20:34 Paul says that *these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions*). Paul did not earn a living as a “religious professional,” such as a pastor or church planter. No, Paul paid his own way in terms of financial support, and this was in order to allow him to fulfill his life purpose, which was not tied to his vocation as a tentmaker. That vocation was a means to an end, allowing him the financial freedom to move about the Roman Empire, establishing churches and strengthening existing congregations.

The calling of the disciples must have been a surprise to those individuals, because they were not the expected choices. They were not “religious professionals.” They were not experts in the Mosaic Law. They did not have theological degrees or long, spiritual pedigrees. They were fishermen, a tax collector, and other vocations of which we do not know. I imagine their reaction, when called by Jesus, was something along the lines of *us? Really? Why us? We're not religious experts. We're fishermen and tax collectors. Why would you want to call us?* Maybe that's what we need; fewer religious “professionals” and more people of other vocations who see those vocations as a way to further the kingdom of God.

Here's one of the great gifts of the church – through the ministry of a church your life can have a great sense of purpose, regardless of your vocation. You can be a Sunday School teacher, you can work with children and youth, you can work in one of the ministries of the church, you can be a Stephen Minister, or one of the other opportunities and it doesn't matter what you do for a living. Don't let your sense of purpose in life be tied to how you earn a living, because it's not. When I look back to some of the jobs I had that were not at all church related I see the ways in which God used that work in ways that I could not see or understand at the time.

We spend a lot of time in our society encouraging people to prepare for their vocational lives. We encourage young people to get a good education and plan for the future. We emphasize the need to secure a good career. Do we, though, emphasize enough the intangible matters of life, such as meaning and purpose and where they can be found?

Value

People need to know they matter. They need to hear that they matter. They need to know they are of great worth and value, because so many people don't believe they have value. While it's important to remind young people to make good grades or get a good job, they really need to hear that they are of value. Young people don't need to be reminded only to have a good career or to work hard; they need to know they are important and that they matter. And it's not only young people who need to hear this; adults do as well, because we all get so beat up by the world and can very easily feel as though we are not of value.

One of the sad realities, I think, of life today is that so many of us fall victim to the lie that we do not have value unless our lives possess certain elements that are constantly trumpeted as being essential to a life of value. If our lives do not look like those in so many media presentations we believe that our lives are of less value and we are not very significant. If we are not taking exciting vacations, we wonder what's wrong with our lives. If we don't have the perfect family, a family that meets a particular image, we wonder what's wrong with our lives and we don't feel of value. If our work is not the type of work that is lifted up as being important, either because it doesn't generate a certain amount of money or doesn't receive enough attention, we wonder what's wrong with our lives and we don't feel of value.

When I was a student I had a good friend who represented everything I wanted to be. He was outgoing and gregarious, while I was quiet and shy. He was a great athlete, while I was not. He was known to everyone at school, while I was someone who blended into the background. He was popular, while I was a stranger to most everyone. My friend possessed enormous potential to be almost anything he wanted to be, and I was so envious of him and so wanted to be just like him. Except for one part of his life. My friend did not feel valued, because he had a parent who constantly belittled him. His parent often told him he was *no good* and that *he would never amount to anything*. Many, many times I heard my friend's parent speak to him in language that communicated one message – *you are worthless*. Every time it happened I could see my friend die a little bit more inside, and all the potential he possessed has gone unfulfilled, and as he has moved through his adult life he has struggled in so many ways, all because of his parent who instilled in him the belief that he had no value.

One of the powerful aspects of the ministry of Jesus was the way in which he instilled a sense of value in people. Zacchaeus, who was a very unpopular man in the city of Jericho, was noticed by Jesus (Luke 19:1-9). Jesus took the time to visit the home of Zacchaeus and to treat him with love and dignity, and it transformed Zacchaeus' life. Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-30), which was a great surprise to the woman. Because of the kindness of Jesus, the woman went back to her town and invited everyone there to meet Jesus. Jesus, while traveling to Jerusalem, healed ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19). There was, perhaps, in the time of Jesus, no other group as outcast as lepers. No one wanted to risk contact with lepers, so lepers were required to make their presence known so that others could keep their distance. The fear of such a dreaded disease was understandable, but the treatment of lepers revealed that they were treated with no value or sense of dignity. Except by Jesus. Imagine what it must have meant to them to be healed and to restored once again to society. Once again they could be with friends and family. What a sense of value and worth it must have given to them! There was the woman who was dragged before Jesus, a woman who was faced with the terrible fate of stoning (John 8:2-11) because she was taken in adultery. She had no value to those who accused her or who wanted to take her life. She had no value to those men, except as a pawn in their attempt to trap and discredit Jesus. To Jesus, however, she was a person of worth and value, and he saved her life. What a testament to the value he saw in her life!

We are all searching for meaning in life, and in Jesus we find that meaning. We find it because we are given a place to belong, we are given a purpose in life, and we know that we are of value!