

GROWING ON PURPOSE AS THE FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST

Acts 13:36; Ephesians 2:10

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PROLOGUE

The Ground Zero Cross is a group of steel beams that resembles a Christian cross. It was found in the rubble of the World Trade Center following the September 11, 2001 attacks. Many have found great meaning in its emergence from the wreckage after such a dastardly act. A Franciscan priest by the name of Brian Jordan spoke over it and declared it to be a "symbol of hope... [a] symbol of faith... [a] symbol of healing."

But not everyone agrees with that assessment. Earlier this summer, four atheists filed suit to have the cross removed from the National September 11 Memorial. They claim the presence of the cross has caused them to suffer "dyspepsia, symptoms of depression, headaches, anxiety, and mental pain and anguish." Virtually everyone, including commentators who opposed having the cross in the 9/11 memorial, considers the lawsuit to be ridiculous.

But there is a great irony here. These four atheists seem to take the cross more seriously than many Christians do. Perhaps it is because we have forgotten the purpose of the cross.

The cross has always provoked a variety of responses, mostly negative. In the first century, the idea that the crucified Jesus was God's anointed Son was regarded as either a scandal or a joke (see 1 Cor 1:23). Ryan Holladay comments:

A weak, suffering deity held little appeal and would have been easily dismissed, were it not for the early Christians' insistence that the death of Christ was everyone's problem.

The concluding words of the first Christian sermon, addressed to a diverse crowd, most of whom were not even present in Jerusalem on the day of Jesus' death, were these: "This Jesus, whom *you* crucified" (Acts 2:36). For two thousand years the Christian claim has been that the whole world stands equally guilty of history's greatest atrocity. God sent his Son to earth and we killed him.

But if the cross represents humanity's greatest collective failure then how did it become a symbol of hope? When Peter's listeners were convicted by his words they asked him what they should do. He said, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven" (Acts 2:38). This only makes sense if

somehow the death of Christ on the cross was itself the event by which all the wrongdoing of the human race is atoned. Holladay adds:

What's more, the very episode that shows humanity at its worst shows God at his best, as he transforms an act of wickedness into a display of mercy and love.

The cross is a paradox. It represents the event that condemns us and the means to pardon us. It shows our guilt but it also shows us how to find forgiveness of sin, friendship with God, and life everlasting. The purpose of the cross can never be to stand as a universal symbol of beauty. It speaks life to those who believe and "dyspepsia, symptoms of depression, headaches, anxiety, and mental pain and anguish" and death to those who do not. We must not forget the real purpose of the cross.

INTRODUCTION

What this means for us today is that as followers of Christ we have been set free from sin and death so we can be free to live out God's purposes. Paul says:

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:19-20 NRSV).

God did not just bring us into existence. He had a special purpose in mind. We live by faith as we live out God's purposes.

These purposes were practiced by the first Christians as recorded in Acts 2, explained by Paul in Ephesians 4, and modeled by Jesus in John 17. They are summarized in the Great Commandment and the Great Commission of Jesus. These two statements sum up what living out God's purposes is all about.

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" {29} Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; {30} you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' {31} The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:28-31 NRSV).

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has

been given to me. {19} Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, {20} and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20 NRSV).

From the Great Commandment and the Great Commission we derive five purposes: love God, love your neighbor, make disciples, baptize and teach them. The practical expression of the love of God is through Worship; the love of neighbor through Service; the making of disciples through Outreach (evangelism); baptism by participating in the Fellowship of the Church; and teaching by learning how to mature in Discipleship.

God wants us to grow in each of these areas. Why not use the start of this new season as an opportunity to do grow in fulfilling God’s purposes for your life? Let’s take another look at each one in turn:

1. "LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART": YOUR PURPOSE IS TO LOVE GOD THROUGH WORSHIP.

"Love God with all your heart": You were planned for God's pleasure, so your purpose is to love God through worship. Here to say more about the music ministry in worship is Stan Pelkey.

[Stan speaks.]

2. "LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF": YOUR PURPOSE IS TO SHOW LOVE FOR OTHERS THROUGH SERVICE.

"Love your neighbor as yourself": You were shaped for serving, so your purpose is to show love for others through service. Here to give us a practical opportunity for service is Judy Yettaw.

[Judy speaks.]

3. "GO AND MAKE DISCIPLES"; YOUR PURPOSE IS TO SHARE THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST THROUGH OUTREACH.

"Go and make disciples"; You were made for a mission, so your purpose is to share the Good News of Jesus Christ through outreach, also known as evangelism. Here to tell us about how we can participate in the Great Commission is Lisa Brown.

[Lisa speaks.]

4. "BAPTIZE THEM INTO ...": YOUR PURPOSE IS TO IDENTIFY WITH

GOD'S CHURCH THROUGH FELLOWSHIP.

"baptize them into ...": You were formed for God's family, so your purpose is to identify with God's church through fellowship. Here to tell us how we can be nurtured in the fellowship of faith is Pat Weatherwax.

[Pat speaks.]

5. "TEACH THEM TO DO ALL THINGS ...": YOUR PURPOSE IS TO GROW TO MATURITY THROUGH DISCIPLESHIP.

"teach them to do all things ...": You were created to become like Christ, so your purpose is to grow to maturity through discipleship. Here to remind us that not only is discipleship important but it can also be a lot of fun is Laura Martinez.

[Laura speaks.]

CONCLUSION

In the Book of Acts we read, "David served God's purposes in his own time" (Acts 13:36a TEV). David wanted to be remembered as one who served God's purposes in his generation. May this be our prayer, also. Let us commit ourselves to serve God's purposes in our time.