

“Purpose Gives Perspective”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens
based on the theme, “PERSPECTIVE REBORN”
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.
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Mark 5:21-23 [NRSV]

²¹When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. ²²Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet ²³and begged him repeatedly, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.”

²⁴So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. ²⁵Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. ²⁶She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. ²⁷She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” ²⁹Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. ³⁰Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” ³¹And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” ³²He looked all around to see who had done it. ³³But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. ³⁵He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

³⁵While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s house to say, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?” ³⁶But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.” ³⁷He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. ³⁸When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. ³⁹When he had entered, he said to them, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.” ⁴⁰And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. ⁴¹He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!” ⁴²And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. ⁴³He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

So I wrote this sermon sitting on the deck of the Don Cesar Hotel on St. Pete Beach. I was listening to a singer named Sunny Jim, who music is part of my life’s hymnal, but probably would never have made it into the Pilgrim

Hymnal in the pew there before you. I didn’t set out this week to write my sermon in such a situation, but some things came up to distract me from my weekly purpose of sermon – writing, and I don’t mean [just] the bikinis. So this

morning I am going to pull back the sermon-creation curtain for a while and share with you how this week's theological reflections came about. My purpose is to invite you to reflect with me about our topic, "Purpose Provides Perspective."

Lyric interruption:

Baby don't worry,
 don't worry 'bout a thing
 Don't worry every little thing
 is gonna be alright
 Rise up this morning
 with the morning sun
 Three little birds singing
 sweet sweet song
 This is my message to you:
 Baby don't worry,
 don't worry 'bout a thing
 Don't worry every little thing
 is gonna be alright

Now, Jesus was on his way to raise a dead girl. To you and me this sounds extraordinary, because we can't imagine anyone thinking someone could raise anyone from the dead. But in Jesus' day such beliefs and expectations were common. Often holy men were thought to have the power to do such things. Remember this was long before the AMA was around. Doctoring was a very different proposition at that time. No, to his listeners I suspect this would have sounded extraordinary for a very different reason.

We would not think it extraordinary for a father to want Jesus to save his daughter from death. We, any of us would do anything, including

trying "holy men" to resurrect her if we thought he could. But to Jesus' hearers, the effort of the father probably seemed the most extraordinary thing about this story. Childhood mortality was common. The death of a female child would have probably not have been considered worth such efforts. After all, a female child had little value, perhaps only as a helper in the household until she could be betrothed, and that would cost her father a dowry - an added expense. But this father loves his little girl and he asks, so Jesus goes to raise this girl, but a few things come up along the way.

Now, I wouldn't begin to compare my week to this "day in the life" of Jesus. My distractions and interruptions to my normal sermon - writing pattern were nothing like life-and-death. They weren't even matters of health-and-welfare. I was in Grand Rapids this week for a symposium on the worship renewal grant that we have received. It was a very inspiring time, and you will be hearing a lot more about this in coming days and weeks. But the trip took three days out of my normal week of preparation, so that was a distraction. On the other hand the trip was very inspiring and it did fit into the purpose of making the most of this grant and the study of worship and how to engage college age persons in planning and leading worship.

All this leads me to say something that we all know. Often we have many purposes going on at one time in life. I believe my main purpose

in life is to glorify God and enjoy fellowship with him. I also believe that is everyone's purpose, the reason we were created, if you will. But in addition, I have a purpose as a husband and father. I have said before that I understand that, in part, to live my life so that at the end of my life if my wife and children still love me and love the Lord I will have been a success. I will have fulfilled my purpose in that regard. But of course, as you know, I also have a central purpose as your pastor. One of my purposes is to prepare and deliver sermons to you each week. But if I am clear about my main purpose in life, it provides perspective on the other purposes that may arise in my life. Knowing what our purpose is, is important for keeping our perspective, for seeing clearly what it is our life is about at any given moment.

I often come into contact with people near the end of their lives who say to me, in some way or another, that they do not think their life has any purpose left. They can no longer work. So they cannot produce anything. They may be too ill or frail to even take care of themselves and so they feel that they have no purpose. As a pastor and a theologian I often try to help them see that if our main purpose is to "glorify God and enjoy fellowship with God," then they can still find ways to do that even if they cannot be "productive" in the ways we often define that. I also often comment that many times we are a blessing to others when we are in a situation where we need them. To love

and serve and bless someone is one of the ways Jesus shows us we can glorify God and enjoy fellowship with God. I think this shows that our lives have value even when we cannot produce something that the market place puts a price on. The other way to look at this is that we never think of a baby or even a teenager as having no purpose even though they are basically not able to "produce" anything of value. In addition, we generally love being able to care for and bless babies and children and shower them with love without ever thinking that they are somehow a burden or that they have no purpose. That is their God-given purpose, it is not thwarting their purpose.

On the surface it would seem that Jesus comes to face a situation where his purpose is being thwarted. He has set out to raise a dead girl when he encounters a woman who has a flow of blood. Now, again, most of us in our day and age would assume this to be a sympathetic and obvious moment that called for compassion. But, like the young girl, a woman with a flow of blood is not only without value in the culture of the day, but was an impediment. To touch either the dead girl or the bleeding woman would render anyone including Jesus unclean. It would have made him "unholy," so it would have seemed to stand in the way of Jesus' purpose of being a "holy man," according to the beliefs of the day. But as we so often see, Jesus' purpose was to reveal the compassion and justice of God. The religious rules and beliefs of

the day were neither. They were “according to the book.” They were the key to being loved by God, supposedly, but they demonstrated neither compassion nor justice. They excluded women for being what God had created them to be: women. Surely that wasn’t and isn’t God’s purpose. Christ healed both as a way to change the perspective of those who thought they knew whom God would include and whom God would exclude then and now.

Lyric interruption:

Once upon a time you dressed so fine
 You threw the bums a dime
 in your prime, didn’t you?
 Peopled call, say, beware doll,
 you’re bound to fall
 You thought they were all kiddin’ you
 You used to laugh about
 Everybody that was hangin’ out
 Now you don’t talk so loud
 Now you don’t seem so proud
 About having to be scrounging
 for your next meal.
 Tell me how does it feel,
 To be without a home,
 to be on your own
 Like a complete unknown,
 Like a rolling stone?

So as I prepared to leave Grand Rapids that’s when the interruptions and distractions from sermon writing became more acute. I was due to leave Grand Rapids on a 5:08 flight. Ironically, the very plane I was awaiting was carrying my son Allen into Grand Rapids as a delegate for this week’s UCC General Synod there in Grand

Rapids. Weather in Detroit delayed the plane by about 45 minutes. But that was only the beginning. We boarded the plane and proceeded to sit there for about three hours. By the time we arrived in Detroit at 9:25 or so, the plane from Detroit to Jacksonville was about a half hour from landing in Jacksonville, having left Detroit two hours before we arrived. By the way, I don’t recount this as any kind of unique or unusually burdensome experience. This is the way flying works these days more often than not it seems to me. Fortunately, I was not alone. Nancy Ricker was with me and she is an extraordinarily experienced and capable traveler. She has dealt with this sort of thing many times before. So when they told us to go to Gate 43 and we found that it was the purgatory where they send all displaced passengers and we were now at the back of a line of some 3-400 people she was undaunted. She pulled out her cell phone – mine had chosen to die right then ironically enough- and began arranging other options for us. I’ll spare you the long details but I ended up on a flight that got me in to Tampa about 2:00 a.m. on Friday morning. Nancy I believe got back to Jacksonville somewhere around 16 hours later Friday after having slept in the Detroit terminal routed through I really don’t know where but she was not on the plane to Tampa. Why Tampa you ask? Well, it would be the best way to fulfill another purpose I had and that was to celebrate my birthday on Friday. Why in Tampa you ask? Well, we had another purpose and that was to get John down to Ellington, Florida, just outside

of Bradenton to camp where, by the way, Twila is on staff this week. As you know, Bradenton is just past Tampa, so I was able to hang my thumb out and Tammy picked me up as she drove by on her way with John. This story has many other twists and turns that served as potential distractions to my purposes, but I don't have time for them all and neither do you. Suffice it to say that this is why and how I was sitting on the pool deck at the Don Cesar writing this sermon.

I have to confess that though I am certain purpose provides perspective there were just too many distractions for me to do a better job of writing this sermon on this topic, so today is a "sermon- in- a- box" for you. I have given you some of the pieces now you must construct your own sermon to either confirm or refute my claim. I will leave you with these questions to use as you construct your argument:

Where are you going? What is going on around you? How has the living Christ surprised you when you thought there was no hope, or things didn't work out the way you hoped, or you have not achieved your hopes? And finally, ask yourself where Christ is at work revealing the compassion and justice of God in your life or the life of someone else and maybe it will give you a new perspective.

As for me I found the lyrics by Sunny Jim helped give me a new perspective after all my adventures in traveling.

The day comes alive,
 the day comes alive
 The scent of night bloom jasmine still
 hangs heavy in the air
 So sweet and soft and fragrant like a
 morning prayer
 There are oranges and mangoes on a
 parrotfish-shaped tray
 And everywhere there's color for this
 brand – new day
 The day comes alive,
 the day comes alive
 The day comes alive,
 the day comes alive
 There's a hallelujah chorus from the
 morning birds in a language so poetic
 there's no need for words
 The sun burns hot now as it rises from
 the shining sea and climbs into the
 heavens smiling down on me
 The day comes alive,
 the day comes alive
 The day comes alive,
 the day comes alive
 And I'm glad to see another bright and
 shining day
 I'm happy for the work I do in every
 way
 Such a simple reassurance but I would
 hate to miss
 And I thank God up in the heavens I'm
 alive to see all this
 The day comes alive,
 the day comes alive
 The day comes alive,
 the day comes alive. AMEN.