

Life Worth Living 2: Where Do We Come from and What Are We Here For?

John 6:1-15, Ephesians 3:14-21 by Patty Friesen (July 28/24)

When we ask the big question this summer of How Should We Live a Life that is Worth Living - two of the underlying questions are: where do we come from and what are we here for? Paul answers that to the Ephesians describing that we come from God our Heavenly Parent and we are be strengthened by the Holy Spirit for a life lived in love with Christ. Paul is not proclaiming a triumphalist Christianity that has conquered the world, as many people imagine when they read this prayer. He is providing a prayer for everyone whose life is somehow fragmented and in need of sorting.

Slide 1 - Mohamad Hafez's life had it all together and had a clear direction: up. Like towering-above-the-Houston-skyline-on-the-sixty-fifth-floor-of-a-skyscraper-you-designed-yourself. That kind of up. Born in Syria, raised in Saudi Arabia, educated in the US, hired by a top architectural firm, and entrusted with massive projects for giant corporate clients, Hafez had so far enjoyed a life of stunning success.

While Hafez had been flying comfortably from meeting to meeting, however, millions of his fellow Syrians had been fleeing what remained of their homes as bombs fell from the sky. The civil war in Syria had escalated just as Hafez's career took off. An ache of grief for his home country haunted his growing success.

Unbeknownst to Hafez, his brother-in-law, a fellow architect, had left home in Syria desperate to seek a better future for his family, not knowing where he would go. He wound up in a refugee camp in Sweden. Once Hafez learned of this and came to visit him at the refugee camp, it turned everything upside down. Suddenly, the fragility of life snapped into focus. Any one of a thousand things could have gone differently for

Mohamed and landed him in a refugee camp like his brother-in-law. That the life he had in Houston, seemed like a blessing but also a responsibility, a task, even a test.

Hafez had always been a Muslim. He had always believed in God. He had always practiced the religion but his practice had been mechanical. It hadn't sunk down to the core. It hadn't animated his whole life. But after that encounter in the refugee camp, Islam came alive for him. Hafez imagine himself standing before God and God asking, "I gave you all these things, security, education, talent. What did you do with them? What did you do while Syria was burning?" And Mohamad imagined the answer he'd give God, "Well, I built some shiny tall buildings for some very rich corporations."

He knew everything needed to change. He understood that professional success couldn't determine his life anymore. He had to do something that would meaningfully benefit others, especially those in dire need. He started to cut back on his hours at work and poured more of his time into producing meticulous scale models of scenes of the beauty of the old city of Damascus: mosaics, ancient porticos, intricately carved doors - capturing the beauty and heritage of his birthplace. He also constructed models that capture the devastation of the war: bombed-out buildings, rubble, shattered glass - capturing the horror and waste of war. He uses these models to teach Americans about Syria. Hafez is still an architect but not the architect of his own life anymore. He thinks of himself as a servant, as a tool for the Holy Architect in however the Holy One leads him. (Volf, *Life Worth Living*, p.120)

Jesus himself in John 6 struggles with his purpose in life - he is willing to feed people but he doesn't want to be their king. Jesus holds a different kind of power from a king. He holds the power of a domestic, of a bread-baker - calmly, patiently working the

yeast of the good news into the dough and waiting for it to rise in its' own time. His purpose is to feed from that patient, non-violent power of God's redemption of the world.

At the age of thirty, Julian of Norwich, England, lay on the verge of death. In this state between heaven and earth, she received a series of visions. Shortly thereafter, she recovered and composed a short narrative of her experience. As part of the first vision, she says God showed her a hazel-nut in the palm of her hand and she reflected on the hazel-nut saying, "It is all that is made. It lasts and will last forever because God loves it and everything exists in the same way by the love of God. In this little hazelnut I saw three properties: the first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, the third is that God cares for it."

For Julian, from the beginning to end, the story of our hazelnut-sized world is the story of God's love. Having spent more than fifteen years mulling over and wrestling with the meaning of her visions, Julian came to this sudden insight: I saw quite certainly in this and in everything that God loved us before God made us, and this love has never diminished and never shall. And all God's works are done in this love and in this love God has made everything for us and in this love, our life is everlasting."

Humans have a special status within this creation of love. Quoting the Bible, Julian says that we were made in God's image and likeness. We have, however, marred that image by failing to live well, by breaking the relationship of love that God intended for us. But crucially, God's love covers even this. God loves without fail, despite our failures. The Holy One who made us for love, by that same love would restore us. As broken as things may seem, God will make them right and bring them

into the fullness of love. Julian hears God's voice say in one of her visions, "All will be well, all things shall be well, all manner of things shall be well."

During the pandemic - we sang Julian's words #587 in Voices Together, and Lois Siemens made a pandemic banner that we hung in the lobby with Julian's words, All will be well, all things shall be willing, all manner of things shall be well."

In the fragile, vulnerable world that God created out of love and for love, we are God's beloved and loved without fail by the God who promises that all manner of things shall be well. What might our world view that focuses on God's unfailing love imply for our lives?

First, there's nothing to prove. We don't have to demonstrate our value by being perfect or pure or super impressive. Our value doesn't come from what we do or who we are but from the One who loves us. And that love is thoroughly, unconquerably, unfailingly dependable. Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord to use the apostle Paul's language. Not even any failure of ours. And that means we don't need to live under the weight of guilt or shame or striving to prove ourselves. We can live in freedom.

Second, because we are loved, we ought to love. And this isn't just a reciprocal thing, us loving God because God loves us. God loves the world and in loving God, we ought to love what God loves. So we ought to love the world. This love should be a finite echo of the infinite love of God. It should therefore be unconditional. Because God loves us despite our failures, we should love others - all others - despite theirs. This is a daunting standard. We are here because of love and our purpose is to love yet. Christians have

not met it. We have not come close to universally demonstrating the love of God to the world. (Volf, Life Worth Living, p. 130)

Smokey Bear slide - It turns out our Christian responsibility to love has three distinct levels that can be clarified by the US Forest Service's Smokey Bear, America's iconic first fire prevention representative who stands at the entrance to every US National Park. Since 1944, Smokey has appeared, clad in jeans and a round brimmed hat on road signs pointing his furry finger with his signature line, "Only you can prevent forest fires." Smokey demonstrates the first level of our responsibility - "only **you**." This is the **agent** of responsibility - the responsible self. Now, Smokey's not trying to say that you are literally the only one on the planet who can prevent forest fires. What he means is you have an inalienable responsibility for your life, choices and actions, including, as it turns out, whether or not you properly extinguish your campfire.

Secondly, with regard to responsibility, there's the bit about the **forest**. This is the **scope** of your responsibility - whose well-being we need to take into consideration. To get a full understanding of our responsibilities, we have to ask, How big is our forest and who is all in it? Not just bears but birds and trees and mushrooms and ferns and fungus. The forest and world is huge and very interconnected as I spoke about in a previous sermon.

Thirdly, there's the **bear** pointing his finger at us. He represents the **authoritative source** of our responsibility to prevent forest fires. He represents the one *to whom* we are responsible. He defines the rules that put us under the obligation to handle fires responsibly. He assesses whether we are, in fact, doing what we can and should to prevent forest fires. And he calls us to account when we fall short, holding us to the

relevant forest fire prevention standards. Smokey Bear is lawgiver, judge, and law enforcement official in one and you don't want to mess with the bear! (P. 36-38)

As Christians, we understand ourselves as responsible agents individually but also collectively - we are all in this together. We understand the scope of the forest to be all the world but most of us can only affect change in our little corner of it. We amplify our individual efforts by supporting refugees and agencies like Friendship Inn, Mennonite Central Committee, camps and schools. Finally, our authoritative source isn't Smokey Bear but the Holy One who made bears. We are answerable to that Holy One. Not in scary bear-like way - well maybe sometimes God speaks like a bear - but more often God speaks like that niggling voice of conscience in the middle of a sleepless night, trying to get our attention and reminding us of something we should have done or shouldn't have said or someone we should contact or some way we should act to a justice issue.

In response to the gifts, opportunities and privileges we have been given like the architect Mohamed Hafez and out of the love God has planted in our hearts like a hazelnut - let's listen to Smokey Bear and do our part for the forest and the world.

Let us pray...Gracious God, you have made us for your good works. Help us to meditate on you and find that flow that you are drawing us into. Thank you for your great love for us always, just as we are and for all we can be in the life worth living you have given us. Amen.