

s-Ephes. series 6 -09-A Song in Your Heart
Ephesians 5:6-20 *Be careful how you live* (P15B)
Fremont Congregational United Church of Christ
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A SONG IN YOUR HEART

Many years ago, a professor was teaching a class in urban anthropology at the University of Southern California. As part of the course, the students were required to interview someone very different from themselves, someone with whom they would not normally converse. One young man in the class, who had lived an unusually comfortable and insulated life, was having such a hard time finding a subject that he considered dropping the course. However, the day the paper was due, he arrived in the class all excited.

“I was at my wit’s end,” he said, “but then it occurred to me to interview our Guatemalan housekeeper. Naturally, I was very nervous because I had never really spoken to her, and it was pretty late at night. But I really needed to do the paper. I went to her room and knocked at her door. I explained what I needed, and asked her if it would be a terrible nuisance for her to tell me something about her life. She looked at me strangely and my heart began to sink. But then she said, ‘Every night before I go to sleep, I rehearse the story of my life, just in case someone should ever ask me. *Gracias a Dios.*’”¹

Probably one of humanity’s greatest existential fears is that life has no meaning. When you think about it seriously, though, it’s really a groundless fear. How can a life be meaningless? By being too short? Even stillborn babies are grieved for. By being too long? Even if in the last few months we aren’t all there, the years we lived up to that point were full of meaning and fulfillment.

My late father-in-law suffered from Alzheimer’s disease, and in his last year or so he was apparently increasingly tormented by feelings of uselessness. He had forgotten many of the details of his life and so, looking back, it seemed rather empty. Nothing could be farther from the truth! George lived an unusual, eventful, and very challenging life. He grew up in rural China as one of four children of Congregational missionaries who certainly did not coddle their kids. He came to the United States at 16 to attend college, served in the Navy during WWII, worked his way through Cal Berkeley and Boalt Hall law school, and eventually served for many years as the deputy district attorney and deputy county counsel of Contra Costa County. He was a very active union leader and an officer of the California Bar Association. Everyone who knew him would have said he was a man of deep integrity and natural grace.

And yet this man, who had lived such a unique and useful life, was tortured by feelings of uselessness. My mother-in-law of course tried to comfort and reassure him, but he could no longer hold onto those reassurances for very long. But even though George could not always remember what he had done, his accomplishments were real. His life had meaning. Of course it had meaning.

¹ Deena Metzger, *Writing for Your Life*, quoted in *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, edited by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat (Touchstone, 1996) p. 280.

“Human beings construct meaning as spiders make webs,” says writer Catherine Bateson. “This is how we survive, our primary evolutionary business.”

That’s what we do, we humans. We spend our lives seeking what is meaningful, and then making meaning out of what we have found. We want to discover the purpose of our lives, to make sense of our human experiences, to unlock the mystery of our daily lives.

As the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians, we look in a glass darkly, seeing only in part. Psychologist Karl Jung would point out that we can only see half of anything; the other half is the meaning that we ourselves give to what we see. But that’s all right! It’s normal. It means that life is always full of discovery and surprise, and new things to learn. If our web of meaning gets broken, we can’t rest until it’s repaired. And when we stop attributing meaning to things, that’s when it’s time to stop living.

Fred Brussat, editor of one of my favorite books, declares that “part of every day’s spiritual challenge is to decipher the lessons in an encounter on the street corner, an article read during lunch, a problem at work, a phone call from a relative, a television documentary, the criticism of a peer, or the silence just before the dawn. We constantly ask, What does this mean?”

This is also how we learn about our faith. When a little Jewish child enters religious school for the first time, he or she is presented with a copy of the Hebrew alphabet that has been dabbed with honey. The child is invited to lick the honey off the letters, thereby discovering that “learning is sweet.” Mastering Hebrew is difficult work, but it helps to have the right attitude!

We don’t have to learn Hebrew or Arabic in order to read the Bible; English translations were deemed sufficient, thanks to Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. But discovering the meaning in sacred texts takes some time and work. It’s like archaeology—you have to dig and dig and dig, then all of a sudden, you hit treasure!

And as the Rabbis suggest, it is sweet work. But it’s not the only work associated with studying the meaning of our lives and our faith. History is important, too. What did our ancestors in faith think and write and do? And then there are the wonders that can be found by studying other world religions.

Most of all, though, the meaning of our faith, just like the meaning of our life, comes to us from other people, the people all around us, not just our spiritual teachers and mentor. Everyone that touches our lives—even through the books we read or the music that we love, or action that inspires us, or creativity that we can learn to understand and appreciate. “Spirituality lets meaning flow into daily life.” And Thich Nhat Hanh, the great Buddhist leader, would add, “In each of us is a seed of understanding. That seed is God.” It’s in there, whether we know it or not, whether we actively use it or not. But if we want that little seed to grow into a meaningful presence, we need to feed it and make room for it. We do that by constantly seeking, discovering, and weaving new meaning as we live out our search for truth, justice and love.

French writer Anais Nin once wrote, “There is not one big cosmic meaning for all. There is only the meaning we all give to our lives, an individual meaning.”² I would agree about every life having an individual meaning, but I also think there *is* one big cosmic meaning.

Being human, we give it a name. We call it God, or Adonai, or Brahma, or Allah, or the Buddha nature. We call it the Great Spirit, the Goddess, Gaia, Zoroaster.

² Brussat, Frederic, “Meaning,” from *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life* (Touchstone, 1996), pp. 296-7.

Whatever name we use, they all have something in common: that which we name as our cosmic meaning is life-giving. And it is what gives us a song in our heart.

The writer of Ephesians likes to list all the bad things that we should not do. I think he had to get pretty specific in order to reach his audience. Chapter five names a lot of wrongs to avoid: fornication, greed, impurity of any kind; obscene, vulgar, or silly talk; drunkenness, neglect of wifely or husbandly duties, disrespect of parents, abusive discipline of children, disobedience of earthly masters, division within the community of faith, and so on. Those Ephesians must've been acting up pretty outrageously! Can you imagine? Were they all getting smashed and sleeping with each other, beating their elderly parents and their kids, refusing to do their jobs, talking dirty or just circulating silly rumors, and being generally greedy, nasty, and selfish?

And yet earlier on, the writer butters them up by praising their faith in Jesus and their love of the saints; and points out that they have been saved through grace and are one in Christ.

Which is the true meaning of this letter? Probably both.

Paul, or whoever it was who wrote Ephesians, seems to have been granted a revelation about the mystery of faith. God gave him a commission to go to the people and offer them God's grace and some tools for understanding that grace. It sounds like a daunting job.

But his advice is from the heart. He does his best here. He says, People, be filled with the Spirit. Sing and make melody to the Lord in your hearts. Give thanks to God for everything, all the time, in every way!

I like his advice. This is as good a way as I have ever heard to describe the presence of God and the meaning and purpose of life. Give thanks, keep a song in your heart.

What makes our hearts sing? Good things, that's what. Peace, joy, thanksgiving, love, usefulness, friendship, kindness, a chance to be creative. If you can't sing, you can still dance. And if you can't dance, then at least tap your toes. Just get that melody going, and sustain it. That song is the web of meaning that unifies creation.

Wendy Wright, in her article, "Two Faces of Joy," describes a Christmas when she was visited by that song of joy in a very peculiar disguise. She and her family came to California for the holidays because her parents were no longer able to travel. It was a bittersweet get-together; the inevitability of loss hung over the festivities. Wendy herself was struggling with a sort of mid-life crisis; she felt disconnected with the season, which normally she loved and enjoyed. Her children lit the Advent candles and decorated the tree, but Wendy couldn't summon much enthusiasm. Well, she told herself, at least they're spending Christmas in our old hometown, and we can all look forward to the traditional Christmas Eve worship service at our former church. Even if I don't have the season in my heart, she thought, I can take my kids to this wonderful celebration so that they can experience the meaning of Christmas.

Wendy called the church to find out the time of the Christmas Eve service. The answering machine informed her that services were at 7:30 and midnight. But Wendy wanted that extra-early family service she remembered. She called back the next day and asked the secretary; but the information was the same. Seven-thirty was the earliest service.

On Christmas Eve the family dressed up and left early for church. Wendy's gloom lifted at the anticipation of the bright, familiar service that would bring her the miracle of Christmas. But when they arrived, the church was already packed full; they had to sit in a side area where they couldn't really see. The altar was very formally decorated with cloth of gold and poinsettias; where were the manger and the guitars? Wendy had a bad feeling about all this.

Then the minister processed in; it was not Wendy's family's old pastor. Things had obviously changed a lot at the old home church. The liturgy was elegant instead of familiar, the sermon confusingly abstract; and there weren't enough song sheets to go around, so people were fumbling with the second and third verses of the carols.

Wendy kept trying to tell herself that Christmas doesn't always have to be the same. She relaxed a little when she was swept up into the singing of "O Holy Night." Then her youngest tugged at her sleeve and whispered wearily, "When is this going to be over? I want to go home."

We'll go soon, she promised him. And she surrendered to the truth that this visit to her former church was a disappointment. And what was worse, she discovered that there actually *had* been a 5:00 family service, complete with a pageant and Santa Claus! Apparently the congregation had decided to only announce this service to church members, to keep it small. Wendy was furious.

The next morning, the excitement under the tree restored Wendy's spirits for a while. While the kids happily played with their toys and her parents went back to bed for a nap, Wendy decided to go jogging.

She was running mindlessly up and down the nearby streets when the full impact of her depression and weariness hit. She found herself calling to mind all the areas of her life that seemed to be barren or endlessly difficult: parenting, friendships, family relationships, work, church community, even her usual interests. And along side these she placed her restless, almost unbearable longings for meaning, for fullness, for *life*.

Then, very clearly, she heard something say, as each of these areas was called to mind: "Not this." "Not this." "Not this."

None of it. Nothing she knew. Nothing she had been given. None of it could respond to the aching of her heart. And Wendy knew that this, this *message*, was her Christmas gift: the realization that her searing desire was shaped to fit only God. Nothing else could satisfy her longing; nothing else would do. She had been struggling to find a resting place for an infinite desire in things that were finite.

The words of a psalm came to mind:

Your love is better than life itself,

my lips will recite your praise.

All my life I will bless you,

in your name lift up my hands.

My soul is richly satisfied,

*on my lips a song of joy and, in my mouth, praise.*³

The insight was clear, simple, and spacious. It overwhelmed her with joy. For now all those things, people, occupations, and difficulties that had been distressing her appeared in a new light. They were now simply what they were, released from the burden of having to fulfill her infinite longing for divine meaning.

"Not this." "Not this." "Not this." The phrase repeated over and over as she jogged home. Freedom. Sweet freedom and a true sense of joy welled up inside her. "Not this." "Not this."

³ Psalm 63:3-5, paraphrased.

What, then? She had no idea. Unnamable, unnamed, mysterious, hidden. She was free to have a new experience, a new knowledge of God.

Wendy Wright now says that “joy arises in the nakedness of not knowing, of not having, of not holding. Joy comes when divinity is found fully in none of the forms you have come to expect it, when none of the earthen vessels wholly encloses divine life.”

“When insights come it is best to store them up in memory, for [they] will be greatly needed in later times of confusion, or in the flat, ordinary perception that is characteristic of most of our daily lives.”⁴ Wendy stored up her Christmas gift of joy, her invitation to the dance, the tune of the song that she could play anytime in her heart. And we can do the same. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

O God who guides us wisely, help us keep a song in our hearts: a song of gratitude, praise and joy. When we are overcome by the trials of life, let that song comfort us with its gentle tune. When we are challenged by tasks and fears, let it ring out loud and strong. When we are confused, let it lead us home. And when we wonder what life is all about, let us listen more carefully, and be reassured. This we pray in the name of your Christ, our Lord. Amen.

⁴ Wright, Wendy M., “Two Faces of Joy,” *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*, vol. VIII, No. 6, pp. 13-22.