

Purpose and Preference In Perspective

Psalm 66
Acts 17: 16-33

[These notes are intended for distribution as a worship aid. The notes may differ from the actual sermon as it is delivered. May God's Spirit use these notes and the words that accompany them for goodness and grace – JLA]

There is a lot of noise in the world today about “spirituality.” Some folks talk about being “spiritual but not religious,” while others talk as if there is no salvation outside of church. Is faith like going to a restaurant and ordering a la carte or is it a *prix fixe* (a fixed price meal) with no options)?

This isn't a new conversation – or argument. The apostle Paul was in Athens about 20 years after Jesus ministry, death and resurrection which was described in the passage from Acts. The Greek pagans – not a pejorative term – but descriptive that they did not believe in the Hebrew God nor the God revealed in Jesus – did believe in gods. They had shrines to them. Their mythology was such that they personified human qualities in divine characters. And they didn't want to miss one.

So they created a shrine to cover any oversights – to the unknown God. Paul compliments them on their imagination. The work of the Holy Spirit does need imagination. But Paul also says there is more. This God revealed in Jesus is enough. The power of living now is revealed in the one who lived and was dead but now lives anew. This resurrection power is not just about the future; it is about how we live now.

The reception was less than overwhelming. Some laughed. Others said I'll get back to you on that. And some gave a full throated – yes. I'm in. One was one of the council members of Athens and another was identified as a woman – something out of the ordinary for many ancient texts.

Paul had a clearly defined purpose. Along with Barnabas, he had been commissioned to go out and share the message about God's gift and presence through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. He had traveled around speaking to Jews and non-Jews. He was always well received. Sometimes those who were non-Jews laughed at him or thought he was a troublemaker. Sometimes those who shared his religious identification became angry at him for his conviction.

But Paul had a purpose – to go out and share his message with others.

Having a purpose is important. A purpose provides reasons and gives direction. A purpose allows us to check our actions and plans against the backdrop of our lives as individuals and communities.

It is important to know the purposes that we affirm and hold to.

Yet even though we have purposes, we also have preferences. A Preference is how we would rather do things. You could say our preferences are the choices we find ourselves comfortable with or the alternatives we choose. You could say that our preferences are our *druthers*.

There are lots of different ice cream choices in the world – Do you prefer Chocolate, vanilla or strawberry? Would you rather have a cake cone, sugar cone or ice cream treat?

To navigate between our purposes and our preference we need to have perspective. That is, we need to know how it is we see things. Perspective allows us to see into an image so that we see space and distance.

Leonardo da Vinci described perspective this way:

There are three aspects to perspective. The first has to do with how the size of objects seems to diminish according to distance; the second, the manner in which colors change the farther away they are from the eye; the third defines how objects ought to be finished less carefully the farther away they are

This is not true only for art. It is true in many times and places in our lives – even in church.

Can our preference for one way of doing things get in the way of our larger purpose?

Preferences are important. Choice empowers. But do we ever get to that point in life when our druthers keep us from achieving something more? Of course there can be no guarantees that if a choice is made to change our preference, a new result will occur. Yet then again, we will not know.

Why do we come to church?

For lots of reasons – to worship, to fellowship, to learn, to serve, to connect.

What is the chief end of humanity? Asks the Westminster Catechism.

The answer is “To glorify God and to enjoy God forever.”

Yes, our spiritual life is about worship and fellowship and learning and service and connection. But our spiritual life is also about honoring, praising, and worshipping God so there can be joy, pleasure, and love in that relationship.

That’s why we are here. That’s why we do what we do.

But are there times when we let our preference for how we glorify God and enjoy God in our time get in the way of either doing that as the body of Christ. You can’t be connected without one thing in one place affecting some other part.

How many of you have been hanging a picture and your aim is just a tad off and you hit your thumb instead of the nail? Your thumb hurts. But the expression comes from your mouth.

Or maybe in this season of commencements, you have a child or grandchild or spouse who is graduating and along the way receives an honor. Of course the recipient is proud, but I have a hunch that a lot of other people are as well.

We are connected one to the other.

What is our purpose in worship at PHPC?

What is your purpose in being here?

Do we allow our preferences to determine how we make decisions as a congregation?

Do we allow our preferences as individuals to determine the way we participate in the church?

What is our perspective on why we do what we do?

As PHPC is in a time on between installed pastors, this is a good time to think about purpose and preference. Do our preferences get in the way of our purposes? Or does our perspective allow us to focus our purpose with our preferences?

The past couple of weeks I have shared with different groups this slide in a presentation. When I show it I ask the question that is there: What do you see?

A variety of responses come up – 2 faces, a vase, a pedestal, a table. There are various ways in which our brains work so that our eyes see.

Do you see the things on Sunday morning that help make plain our purpose as followers of Jesus to worship God in Christ in such a way that not only do we learn and grow but that we also may share this Good News with Duluth, Gwinnett County, the state of Georgia, the United States and the world?

Or to put it another way – how is what happens on Sunday a way of connecting your faith with your everyday life?

Thanks be to God!

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