

“Towards a larger purpose”

February 1, 2009

Text 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Philippians 4:10-14

I.

In the Broadway Musical, *1776*, a scene opens with John Adams crying out,

Is anybody there? Does anybody care?

With all that’s going on with the economy and with life in general, we may all feel that way from time to time: *Is anybody there? Does anybody care?*

The resounding answer, of course, is YES. There IS *somebody* there; and *somebody* DOES care. Of course, the assumption is that the *somebody* we’re talking about is God. And certainly, God *is* there and God *does* care.

But aren’t *we* there too? And don’t *we* care? Without hesitation, at our best, the answer is YES. We *are* there; and we *do* care.

Forever, it would seem, political and religious leaders have called upon us to *find meaning in something larger than ourselves* ... which, of course, is how we demonstrate our caring and our regard for others.

Many of us can recall (and most of us have, no doubt, heard) President John F. Kennedy’s challenge to our nation in his inaugural address. It was January of 1961:

Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.

This quest for a *larger meaning* echoed through the voice of Martin Luther King on the civil rights trail in the fifties and sixties. For King, the larger meaning is LOVE. Loving one another—not because the *other* is necessarily likeable—but, rather, loving them because God loves them, and that’s what God calls us to in Christ.

Moreover, we are to love others because it is only through LOVE that the poison of hatred and ill will can be extirpated from the human spirit. Our larger purpose is always guided by LOVE with an eye on an equitable *peace with justice* for all people.

II.

In his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Austrian psychiatrist, Victor Frankl documents the profound power a sense of life-purpose has in our lives.

A survivor of the Nazi concentration camps in World War II, Frankl noted how, often times, those without a larger sense of purpose gave up and succumbed ... while those who saw themselves as having a mission to complete would hang on and struggle to survive.

Towards a larger purpose ...

Don't we all need some *life-purpose* to give our lives direction and meaning? Don't we all need something larger than ourselves to commit ourselves to, to live for?

Friends, we all know we're living in the vice-grip of hard times.

- Every day, we hear about more people losing their jobs; we hear about the huge layoffs and about company after company failing in these economically stressful and *down* times.
- Every week we learn about more foreclosures; and about couples/ individuals who can no longer make their mortgage payments because the income simply isn't there. And what are they to do?

For sure, times are tough. But tough times are also an opportunity for us to recommit **towards a larger purpose**. That larger purpose, in part, is to look out for one another. As a people, as communities, we've got to continue to uncover ways of connecting with one another ... ways of sharing our common burdens.

Just as necessity is the mother of invention, in the same way, our needs as a nation—which cross ethnic, social and economic class lines—are an opportunity for us to come closer together as a diverse people and find new ways of supporting and caring for each other.

We've all got our stories to tell. Still, at the end of the day, what we need is to find our larger purpose in each other. That's what Christian love calls us to. We're all in this thing together, all linked together in this venture called *life*.

III.

This helps illumine the larger meaning of Paul's concern with *food offered to idols* in 1 Corinthians 8. In many ways, this is a difficult situation to explain ... *food offered to idols* ... what's this about?

- In the early church world, there were many pagan cults ... in many of these cults, part of the ritual of their cultic observance was to offer food—preferably meat—to the different idols or gods.

- Later, this food (meat) would typically be sold in the market place and eaten in private homes or at festival celebrations of whatever kind.
- The problem arose when new Christians (who had converted from a pagan cult) would find themselves in a situation where this very food (meat), which had been offered to an idol, was being served. For them to eat this food, or to be at a table where others were eating this food, gave them a guilty conscience. And sometimes it would result in them leaving the church.

While on the surface this would seem to be obviously irrational notion, still, apparently many who were coming into the fledging Christian churches of this period felt an emotional attachment to the memory of these cultic practices.

- Therefore, Paul's solution to this problem was that all church members refrain from eating *food offered to idols* in public places, certainly whenever other church members, who had been in one of these pagan cults, were in their presence.
 1. On the one hand, because he doesn't believe in idols or *other* gods, Paul acknowledges that eating food that had been offered shouldn't be any big deal. It's a neutral thing, neither good nor bad.
 2. Yet, on the other hand, because it was a stumbling block of such consequence for some of the new Christians coming into the church, he urged them—in the name of love—to be big ... and to make this minimal sacrifice ... which they apparently did.

Again, the larger question here is love and **living towards a larger purpose**. When we live our lives **towards such a larger purpose**, we have consideration for other people, particularly those going through hard times; and we make the necessary adjustments.

IV.

Friends, the Christian life asks us—all the time—to give up things ... to make sacrifices in the name of love, in the name of a **larger purpose**. That's the nature of our faith. To live a Christian life, we gotta give up stuff ... whatever it is.

That's why the symbol displayed on the outside of our churches and above our sacred altars is not a dollar sign or some other commercial sign; it's a **cross**.

Our faith is a faith of sacrificial love. Not that our goal in life is to sacrifice; but, rather, that our purpose in life is to love one another and to lift up the common good ... which almost always involves some measure of sacrifice.

From what our economic experts are telling us, things are going to get worse with the economy before they're going to get better. So we not only have to prepare as best we

can for the even-tougher days ahead, we have to develop an attitude and a spiritual disposition that will help sustain us.

And our spiritual disposition needs to be ***looking out for one another***. Looking out for one another is what Christians do. Always, that's a core element in living **towards a larger purpose in life**. And again, to whatever extent, we *are* each other's larger purpose.

V.

As we continue to work our way through these times, let's resolve today (if we have not already) ... to do it together. For that's the only way: supporting one another with our prayers, our love and our friendship.

We never know what information or resources any of us might have that can be helpful. The right contact or referral for a job ... a new living situation ... health care support ... good buys on food and on and on. We never know. That's why networking and sharing our personal stories are so important.

Together we are members of the ***body of Christ*** that is the Church. As we come to the Communion Table today, we're reminded how, together, we are a solidarity. Which means, as Christians and people of good will, we share one another's burdens.

Clearly, this is what they did in the early church. In the reading I shared from **Philippians**, Paul remembers, joyfully, how the Philippi church reached out to him when he was in distress.

For Paul and for us, the secret is to stay close to God. For it is then, notes Paul, that ***I can do all things through him who strengthens me***. God will/does strengthen us; but God does this through love.

The **larger purpose** of our lives as Christians is to do what we can—each of us—to sustain and support one another. That's what LOVE does.

As 1 Corinthians reminds us, *love bears and things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. Love never ends.*

All praise be unto God. Amen.

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlcchurch.com

