

J.D. Ousley
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Mk12
“The Spirit Driven Life”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

I am glad to hear parents encouraging their children to succeed. Still, I get uneasy when I hear parents tell their kids, “You can be *anything* you want to be.”

The parents’ idea is that if their children work hard and have the right goals and values, they will eventually be able to succeed at whatever occupations they choose.

Unfortunately, in the real world, many children will grow up and discover that they *won’t* be able to do what they want. After all, there’s fierce competition for the most desired roles in life.

It’s very hard to get into medical school. Most rock bands will never play in Madison Square Garden—however hard they work on their music.

And Christians will point to another reason why focus on personal success isn’t the best advice for a young person. In today’s Psalm, the author claims that, “Unless the Lord builds the house, their labor is in vain who build it.”

The idea is that God is behind every important human achievement. You may think that you do it all yourself, but the reality is that God is your inspiration. The Lord builds the house. The Holy Spirit provides the motivation and the energy—even if you’re not aware of God’s action behind the work you are doing.

Now this belief doesn’t deny the need for the individual effort that we put into our work. A young violinist who doesn’t bother to practice will never get to Carnegie Hall—even with divine assistance!

But many of our accomplishments are the result of God’s work behind them. Through divine guidance, you may come across a job opportunity that you would never have thought of on your own. And that job turns out to be one of the best things that ever happened to you.

This idea that the divine is behind the best things in our lives can also be comforting. For it means that the burden of our goals isn’t entirely upon our shoulders. It’s a relief to be able to offer to God the “credit” for a good thing that happens. As the old spiritual says, “To God be the glory, great things he hath done.”

There is a huge difference between this God-centered faith and a life that is centered entirely on yourself. It’s not a question of morality—you can live a good life without relying on God. It is a question of *truth*—of how you see the universe to be constructed.

This is one of the best aspects of Rick Warren’s book that we’re reading in the Incarnation Book Challenge. The book is entitled, *The Purpose Driven Life*, and for Warren, a purpose-driven life is a spirit-driven life.

His argument in favor of this view is a simple one: God has put us on this earth to enjoy his creation and to serve him.

So when our purpose in life becomes aligned with God’s purpose for us, we will find happiness. When we become distracted by selfish desires, we find that our lives get bogged down in conflict and disappointment.

This is a very different way to look at life from the secular philosophy that many people have. That philosophy focuses on satisfying our personal wishes. As Rick Warren

remarks, “Self-help books usually offer the same predictable steps to finding your life’s purpose...Set some goals. Figure out what you are good at. Aim high.” And so on.

Warren contrasts this way of looking at life that is found in self-help books with a God-centered philosophy. He writes, “You need more than self-help advice. The Bible says, ‘Self-help is no help at all. Instead self-sacrifice is the way...to finding yourself, your true self.’”

Or, as Jesus says, the way we gain our lives is to lose them for his sake. This is another way of saying: Don’t try to do everything on your own. Let God help you build your house. God-help is much more effective than self-help!

Today is our annual Stewardship luncheon, when we give thanks for all that God has given us as a parish. While being stewards of our church building and our parish house is a weighty responsibility, it’s also a precious gift to us.

It is a challenge sometimes to find the money to pay the bills. That’s why we make our pledges! But, in general, it’s a joy to call Incarnation our spiritual home. Stewardship of our church is a burden that we all freely accept.

The Gospel reading that we heard is particularly appropriate for us, today. It tells of a time when Jesus and his disciples were watching people come to make donations for the Jerusalem Temple.

Mark’s Gospel reports that “Many rich people put in large sums of money.” Afterwards, “A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.”

An older English translation called the woman’s donation, “the widow’s mite”—a “mite” being the smallest coin in England in past times. We might compare the woman’s action to contributing a dollar for a fund drive to build a new library at your university. You know the dollar would make little difference in raising money for the library—and you wouldn’t expect to see your name on a plaque beside the names of those who gave millions.

But Jesus would have seen your dollar from a different perspective. He said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

From a secular point of view, the woman might perhaps have been wiser to buy food for herself. But for her, it was more important to show her trust in God.

And the point for us today may be to remember what we have to start with determines what we will want to give. What is now called, “proportional giving” levels the playing field. If you don’t have a lot of small cash, you will only be able to make a small donation—and that’s fine.

Few of us will be able to follow the woman’s example and give “all that we have.” But we can give what we’re able to, based not on what other people give but on what we have in our personal treasuries.

So what do you tell children when they are beginning to think about what occupations they will prepare for? You can help them to be realistic—to think about jobs that are within their reach.

But you can also encourage them to seek above all what Jesus called, “abundant life.” This is life that is full of meaning and purpose—life that looks for God’s blessings.

Children can’t always grow up to do what they dream of doing. But if they choose a Spirit driven life, they will discover that miracles happen!