

## The burden of an aimless life

Judges 21:25

November 16, 2008

What do you want to be when you grow up?

I'm serious! What do you want to be when you grow up? I'm talking to you, all of you, not just the teens and twenty-somethings! You are still growing up, aren't you?

So, what do you want to be when you grow up?

Don't tell me you want to be a writer or an artist or that you want to own your own business or teach skydiving. I didn't ask what you want to do, I asked what you want to be! What do you want to be? What kind of person do you want to be? What kind of life do you desire? What is your aim? What do you want to be?

Do you want to be like Jesus? Do you dare to want to be like Jesus? What if you did make that your aim? What if we all made that our aim -- to be like Jesus? What if ... we succeeded? What would our church be like? What would our world be like?

We have been reviewing together phrase by phrase the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith. So far, we have been "setting the stage."

*We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our Father, and to your deeds we testify ...*

We believe in a God who is Eternal Spirit, wholly different from us, wholly beyond us, but a God who is our Father, too, near to us, concerned about us, a God who provides, protects, comforts, guides, a God who acts: "To your deeds we testify."

*You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death ...*

That sets the stage, the world stage, on which we are placed to act out our lives. It is a world that is beautiful and good, made with care and with intention, and we -- you and I -- are made with special care and particular intention, made to be like God, made to be the mirrors in which people will see the image of God. And the way, the way to life, is set before us. There is the way! Follow it! Choose life!

The stage is set, and the rest of the statement testifies to what God does in response to what we do on that stage, what God does in response to what we have done on that stage.

*You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin ...*

"You seek ..." God seeks us. God doesn't remain distant and aloof, waiting for us to find our way to him.

"You seek in holy love ..." God seeks us because God loves us, with a love that is holy, which means a love that is different, not like our loves which are often a confused mix of motives and aims and needs and desires, but a love that seeks only what is good.

"You seek in holy love to save ..." We need to be saved! Because we are lost! Because we are dying! Because we have made a mess of our lives and a mess of this world! We believe in a God who seeks to save: to help, to restore, to rescue, to heal, not to accuse or condemn or destroy.

"You seek in holy love to save all people ..." All people, not a chosen few, not just those who are worth saving, not just those who have earned it, not just those who are part of a select group, a select race, a select religion, but all people. All people ... that must mean you, too!

"You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin ..." To save people from sin, from all the ways we turn our backs to God, insulting what God has done and abusing what God has made, from all the ways we do harm to ourselves and to our neighbors, from selfishness and pride and greed and envy, from hatefulness and lust and gluttony and apathy. And to save people from the burden of a sinful life which is guilt and shame and encroaching death.

But not just sin and its burden. God seeks to save us too from aimlessness, and from the burden of an aimless life, which is to be lost. Did you notice the message posted on our church sign this morning?

*You can know where you are and still be lost!*

That word "aimlessness" is an interesting addition to the UCC Statement of Faith. We often speak about what God does to save us from our sins, but how often do we hear talk about what God does to save us from aimlessness? But aimlessness and sin are really two sides of one coin, two aspects of one human problem. We are saved from the burden of sin by God's forgiveness, but if we are merely forgiven, we may still be lost! If we are not aiming our lives at something, if we are not aiming our lives at goodness, if we are aimless, we are still lost.

Sin defines the problem in terms of where we have come from and aimlessness defines the problem in terms of where we are going. We need to be saved from something -- sin, and saved for something -- a life that has an aim.

Forgiveness frees us being stuck permanently in reverse, always dragged down by the burden of where we have come from and what we have done. But we still need to know where we are going. We still need to have a clear sense of what we want to do and be. We still need to be saved from aimlessness.

So what is aimlessness and what does it look like? I read a news report this week in *The Christian Century* magazine about a twenty-four year study among college students, measuring their scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. The study finds that students are "increasingly addicted to self-love" and blames that trend on school programs designed to boost self-esteem in children. When children are taught over and over to think "I am special," they develop narcissism rather than self-esteem.

"I am special." Focussed inward. Focussed on me. Preoccupied with me. Obsessed with me. It's not just college students, is it? It's us, too. It's the prevailing attitude of our entire culture. You know our culture's universal mantra: *Be yourself*. You know our culture's only inviolable rule: *Be true to yourself*.

One of the study's authors cites these typical responses to everyday problems:

*Worried about how to act in a social situation?*

*"Just be yourself."*

*What's the good thing about your drug or alcohol addiction?*

*"I learned a lot about myself."*

*Concerned about your performance?*

*"Believe in yourself."*

*Should you buy the new pair of shoes or get the nose ring?*

*"Yes, express yourself."*

*Why should you leave the unfulfilling relationship [or] quit the boring job [or] tell off your mother-in-law?*

*"You have to respect yourself."*

Good advice? But if it's all about you, if it's only about you, what about everybody else? And what about you? Wouldn't self-esteem be better served by nurturing a self that can be esteemed, by teaching honor and responsibility and respect and service and sacrifice?

A person who is focussed inward, whose first priority is "me," whose attention is on what I need, what I want, what pleases me, a person who is not aiming at anything outside himself, anything beyond herself, is aimless. They are lost.

If you want to know what that looks like, just read the book of Judges. We read this morning the critical summary of that period in Israel's history: *There was no king in Israel at that time. Everyone did whatever they pleased.*

*Everyone did whatever they pleased ...*

Ehud plunged a sword into King Eglon of Moab, burying the whole sword, shaft and handle, into the fat king's belly.

A woman, Jael, killed the powerful commander of a Canaanite army, after giving him shelter in her tent, by driving a tent peg through his skull.

Abimilech, one of seventy sons of Gideon, killed all his brothers on top of a single stone so he could become ruler of their clan.

Jephthah made an oath to God, promising a human sacrifice in exchange for a military victory, and kept the oath by murdering his own daughter.

A Levite spent the night with his concubine at the home of an old man in Gibeah. When some men of the town came knocking at the door wanting to have sex with the Levite, they pushed his concubine out the door instead. The men raped her and left her for dead on the doorstep and the next morning, the Levite took her body and cut it into twelve pieces, sending one piece to each of Israel's twelve tribes asking them to join him in taking revenge on the people of the tribe of Benjamin, inciting civil war.

Those are just a few "highlights" from the book of Judges demonstrating what happens when everyone does whatever they please!

When pleasing yourself is the first priority, when being yourself is the only rule, it doesn't really matter who gets hurt. And who does get hurt?

I thought about that when I heard the story of the arrest this week of two University of Northern Iowa football players for drug possession. I understand how our justice system works. These young men should be regarded as innocent until proven guilty. But if they are guilty of the crimes of which they have been charged, who is hurt?

The team is hurt, robbed of the potential contributions of two of their best players.

Fans are hurt, no longer able to enjoy watching these talented players, and worrying that their team's fortunes will suffer.

But above all. I think, it is the two young men themselves who are hurt. I have tried to put myself into Johnny Gray's mind, wondering what he must feel. All those memories, those good memories, of playing with style and energy and bringing delight to Panther fans, enjoying an exemplary four-year career, now quite likely ending in dishonor and shame.

All because, in the end, it was about them, about what they wanted ... But you deserve to get what you want, don't you? Don't you???

*You seek in holy love to save [us] from aimlessness and sin ...*

From sin, by forgiving us, by showing us another way, a better way, and from aimlessness by giving us a goal, a model, to be like Jesus. Because it's not about being yourself, it's about becoming a self.

A self is what we make of all the raw materials of our lives, by our choices, by our allegiances, by our aims. You can't just "be yourself" because you're not a self, just the confused jumble of your genetics and your environment and your instincts and your untrained desires. Your "self" is what you make of all of that "stuff."

So what do you want to be when you grow up? What kind of self do you want to become? Do you want to be like Jesus? Here's how: by denying yourself, giving yourself away, and following him.

If you try to find yourself, Jesus says, you will lose yourself, but if you lose yourself to follow him, you will find yourself. It's not about you. But when you know that, when you know it's not about pleasing yourself, but about pleasing God, then you aren't lost anymore, then you are found, then you are saved. Then you are.