

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
August 29, 2010
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: What Do You Pursue in Life?
Jeremiah 2: 4-13, Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16

“**Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness**’ is one of the most famous phrases in our Declaration of Independence. It is a paraphrase of an earlier statement by English philosopher, John Locke.” However, I would prefer as a Christian that the phrase stated: **Life, liberty, and the pursuit of Godliness**. You see I have often wondered about the meaning of “**the pursuit of happiness**” part of the phrase. No one I have asked about it has been able to give me a satisfactory answer. The problem with this famous phrase to me is that one person’s pursuit of happiness can be someone else’s misery. Finally, I found a good answer on Wikipedia of all places: “The seventeenth-century English philosopher Richard Cumberland wrote: “**that promoting the well-being of our fellow humans is essential to the ‘pursuit of our own happiness.**’” From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Cumberland’s statement, **promoting the well-being of our fellow humans** is very close to what I think Jesus would call the pursuit of happiness in the Sermon on the Mount. **Promoting the well-being of our fellow humans** is one of the messages in today’s lessons, as is **the pursuit of Godliness**. Personally, I think our country would be better off if that famous phrase in our Declaration of Independence had said, “**Life, liberty, and the pursuit of Godliness by promoting the well-being of our fellow humans.**” This is definitely what Jesus taught his disciples then and teaches us now. It is what we need to pursue in our life and liberty. Ah, but is it what we truly pursue?

There are major problems when humanity pursues something other than Godliness and the well being of others as we learn in the passage from Jeremiah. Around 627/626 B.C, Jeremiah, God’s prophet to Israel and Judah, proclaimed to them that God was indicting his people for pursuing everything and everyone but God in their lives. In summary, God’s indictment was this: “Even after all I have done for you, delivering you from enslavement in Egypt, leading you safely through the wilderness and delivering you ‘into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things,’ you abandoned me to pursue false gods like Baal which led to treating me and people unjustly. Like an unfaithful wife, you committed adultery with other gods and nations. Instead of counting on me to protect and guide you, you ‘sought to bolster up your declining strength by making alliances with the great imperial powers’ around you. Instead of returning to worship me, the one true God, ‘you sought a vain and worthless remedy for your national ills.’ You traded me, ‘the living water of life’ for cisterns that were cracked and whose promises that could hold no water.” As a result of their apostasy against God, Israel and Judah fell in terrible wars to Assyria and Babylon. For 50 years they became a people without a nation. This is what happens to people, nations, and religions who pursue anything and everything but God and the good of others in their lives. They become confused, divided and lost. [Interpretation: Jeremiah](#), pg. 28-29.

Rev. R. Craig MacCreary tells a story about a young woman named Michelle whose life was headed in the same direction. The year 2006 had been a difficult one. She had pursued the man of her dreams to marry him, but “her marriage dissolved when she discovered that her husband was unfaithful.” Her job, which she also pursued, changed when she took on the greatly added “responsibility of another worker who was ‘downsized.’” Needless to say her life was filled with stress as well as questions.” Two of the great pursuits of her life were turning out to be cracked cisterns instead of living water. “She considered moving away to start over with a new job. Maybe a fresh start would be for the best. Or, she could go back to school for additional training. She acknowledged that she had made a mess of her life,” to the point she could not care for herself or others. She wondered if she had the courage to turn her life around.” What shall she pursue?

“All those thoughts and questions were stirring in Michelle’s mind when she spent four days at the beach. She had looked forward to getting away since the beginning of that summer. She needed time away to think about her future.”

“Early one morning, Michelle was walking on the beach. It was a beautiful summer morning to walk along the shoreline. She noticed that someone had written something in the sand and went to investigate. ‘Jesus loves you’ it read. There was no one around so she was unsure who wrote it. However, those words, ‘Jesus loves you’ were as if God was speaking directly to her. She was at a point in her life when she really needed to believe those words. If Jesus loves her, then maybe in spite of all her confusion, failures, and stresses he could help her to love herself and others again.” Those words written in the sand changed her outlook and would ultimately change the direction of her life.” She knew she needed to pursue a relationship with God in Jesus Christ rather than try to live life by her own power. She knew she needed to seek his help in finding out what else she was to go after in her life. “Emphasis,” Sept. 2, 2007

Eventually, the people of Israel and Judah realized the same thing, saw the writing in the sand, so-to-speak, and turned back to pursuing the one true God. God was there to help them. They then understood that God’s purpose in indicting and judging his people was to clean them up and ultimately save them from their destructive pursuits. Fifty years after the collapse of Israel and Judah, God delivered his people from enslavement in Babylon back to the Promised Land where they had the life and liberty to pursue Godliness. Even when we fail to pursue Godliness, which includes the wellbeing of others, God continues to pursue us to redeem us because he loves us.

This is the same message we hear about in the passage from the Preacher in Hebrews. He reminded those early Christians as he reminds us that God had done a marvelous thing for us in sending his son, Jesus Christ to be the ultimate sacrifice for our sins and to make us holy before God again. As God rescued the people of Israel from enslavement in Egypt and exile in Babylon, so has he rescued us from enslavement to sin and exile to everlasting death. The Preacher of the Hebrews guided that early church, and now us, in how to respond to these gifts from God, and how to pursue Godliness, which includes the wellbeing of others in our life and liberty.

The Presbyterian scholar, Thomas Long comments in the Interpretation commentary on Hebrews (pgs. 142-145) on what the Preacher of the Hebrews wrote

on how to pursue Godliness, which includes the wellbeing of others.

The first pursuit of Godliness is mutual love shown in simple hospitality. “It is almost as if the Preacher had said, Jesus Christ, the great high priest who offered the perfect and lasting sacrifice and who now sits in majesty at the right hand of God, has shown up unexpectedly at our door. In response, “we polish the silver and set the table for company.” “Whenever the church shares a meal together—or any other aspect of its life—it is to continue to show ‘mutual love,’ that is, love for the other members of the congregation, one’s fellow Christians, the ‘brothers and the sisters’. But this love should not be so ingrown that the church does not make a place at the table for the stranger, ‘for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.’” The stranger may be Jesus himself. Sharing these times with the stranger connects us to the heavenly joy of Mt Zion that we talked about last week. We no longer should have family night suppers, church programs or social events at First Presbyterian just for the members; we are to be gathered in Godliness which includes the well being of others, including the homeless and hungry for they may bring the presence of God with them. This we do when we host families for a week or help people with utilities.

“The third-century church order Didascalia gives instructions to bishops about the kind of ready hospitality they should show if a stranger should unexpectedly arrive at the assembly: ‘If a destitute man or woman, either a local person or a traveler, arrives unexpectedly, especially one of older years, and there is no place, you, bishop, make such a place with all your heart, even if you yourself should sit on the ground, that you may not show favoritism among human beings, but that your ministry may be pleasing before God.’” Simple hospitality is the first pursuit of Godliness.

The second pursuit is “Ministry with the Wounded. This has to do with the prison ministry and the care of victims of torture and abuse. The church is not to engage in condescending charity but to provide a ministry of empathy, ‘as though you yourselves were in prison with them . . . as though you yourselves were being tortured.’ We do not do this because we are naturally compassionate, but as an imitation of Jesus, who entered so fully into the human situation that he is able ‘to sympathize with our weaknesses’ and, therefore, to supply the grace really to ‘help in time of need.’” Our deacons are looking into the local prison ministry begun by the late Rev. Clinton Lewis. We support the Safehouse program. So we are pursuing “Ministry with the Wounded.”

In the third pursuit, the Preacher shifts gears a bit. He becomes more like the prophet Jeremiah and goes from preaching to meddling: From grace to warning of God’s punishment for doing evil acts. The topics are marriage, sex and money. What he says about these three touchy topics is fairly conventional, namely that the marriage between a man and a woman must be held in honor by all. The community can be destroyed by love as much as by hate—loving the wrong person in the wrong way by committing fornication and or adultery. Loving the wrong things such as money before loving God and our neighbors can cause the same destruction.

The Preacher reminds the Hebrews and us that Jesus, the great high priest, has purified our hearts and bodies so we can pursue Godly ways of life. Fornication and adultery however “are not merely attacks on marriage and morality; they are denials of the sanctifying work of Christ.

“As for money, the Preacher cites two Old Testament references—‘I will never leave you or forsake you’ and ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid . . .’ to support his directive to be content with what we have and not be acquisitive. What is inventive about this is, **first**: the suggestion that the love of money is not so much the product of greed as it is the fear of abandonment, and **two**: the intriguing theological claim that when Jesus Christ grasps our one hand in love it frees us to open up the clenched other one and let the money go to do Godly work.” “Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?” Even that early church, like ours, in tough times and fearful times, had a budget to meet to support the congregation and reach out in missions to strangers and minister to the wounded.

In the fourth pursuit, the Preacher speaks of worship and service. Like your leaders before you,” those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” They were faithful in coming to worship services. They were also bold “to offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name” so others might hear of Jesus Christ and come to a Godly life in him, too. And in this pursuit we are reminded...“Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Such is worship and service.

Why should we do all this? Because, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” His saving grace, his presence, his call to us and outreach to the world have never changed and never will. He is the living water that sustains us. He is our living declaration of independence from sin and death, who has shown us all what “life, liberty and the pursuit of Godliness” is all about. Let’s pursue it with enthusiasm!