

## “You’ve Meant Something to Someone”

A Sermon Prepared by Guest Pastor Gary N. Nottis for  
The Congregation of St. John’s United Church of Christ, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania

February 17, 2019

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The musical, “Man of La Mancha,” is the story of the ridiculed Don Quixote, who lives with the illusion of being a knight of old, battling windmills that he imagines are dragons. Near the end of the musical, Don Quixote is dying and at his side is Aldonza, a worthless [prostitute] he idealized by calling her Dulcinea—Sweet One—much to the howling laughter of the townsfolk. But Don Quixote had loved her in a way unlike anything she had ever experienced.

When Quixote breathes his last, Aldonza begins to sing, “The Impossible Dream.” As the last echo of the song dies away, someone shouts to her, “Aldonza!” But she pulls herself up proudly and responds, “My name is Dulcinea.” The crazy knight’s love had transformed her.<sup>1</sup>

Last week, I spoke about the need for all of us to live a life of “walkabout.” That means relishing the great moments of our lives, seeking to discover and embrace the lessons that success and failure can teach us, and recognizing the many abilities each of us possesses, skills we should put to use for the benefit of everyone. Further, a life of “walkabout” also means taking to heart the reality that we each have a purpose. All of our lives have meaning, and even crazy old knights and people sometimes regarded as insignificant can mean something to someone. Consequently, we are to love and be loved for the sake of our transformation and that of others.

To begin, we must first understand that we live and find our humanity in a web of relationships that includes God and other people. Our relationship with God is affirmed in Genesis 2:7, which says, “[T]he Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” How can we not be in relationship with God? How could we not be important to the Holy One? After all, our lives depend on God’s very own breath of life and love to animate our bodies. We mean something to God, no matter who we are.

Something else of importance in that verse from Genesis 2 is the usage of the Hebrew word, “hā-’ādām,” which is often translated into English as “man.” Actually, “hā-’ādām,” is better understood to mean, “the earth creature.”<sup>2</sup> In the story, “the earth creature” represents all of humanity, not just an individual. Further, the “earth creature” had no gender.<sup>3</sup> Its only identity was to be found in its bond

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<sup>1</sup> This story, “Dulcinea,” appears on page 334 of William J. Bausch’s book, *A World of Stories for Preachers and Teachers* (New London, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Psalm Publications, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978): 78.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

with God.<sup>4</sup> It was not until “the earth creature” expressed a need for relationship and community, with something like itself, that the notion of male and female entered the Genesis story. We hear this in Genesis 2:21-22, when God took a rib of hā-’ādām and made a woman, called in Hebrew, “iššâ.” When God brings the female before “the earth creature,” hā-’ādām asserts in Genesis 2:23 (New International Version), “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” The Hebrew word translated as “man” in the narrative then changes to “iš,” indicating gender, that of a male.<sup>5</sup>

The original Hebrew phrasing of the Genesis account tells us that the man and the woman came into existence at the same time, neither superior in regards to the other.<sup>6</sup> It also speaks to us of a profound reality, which is this. True humanity, the one shaped by God, can only exist when we live in “unity, solidarity, mutuality, and equality” with another person.<sup>7</sup> It is in our connectedness and the meaning we give each other that we find our identity as human beings. These truths have even greater implications for us.

Besides having no gender, “the earth creature” of Genesis 2 also could not be categorized into any of the other groups that separate people today. It had no ethnicity, no age, no physical or mental disability, no sexual orientation, no religion, and no social status. Yet, suppose God had given “the earth creature” belonging and companionship in terms of one of those categories. That could have happened. Imagine God had then brought forth both the able-bodied and disabled from hā-’ādām. Would not the significance of the statement in Genesis 2:23 have been that we are truly human only when the able-bodied and disabled live together in harmony and impartiality?

The Genesis 2 text speaks of each of us living in a web of relationships with God and other people. Science has also come to affirm this view, as well.<sup>8</sup> But, why point this out? It is because these webs of relationships are the basis for our having purpose in life, for our meaning something to someone.

Our interconnectedness with others provides us with the purpose of teaching them about their humanity. When we are born, we don’t come into the world knowing how to be a human being. We must learn how to do so through the words and actions of other people, either directly or indirectly.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>8</sup> P. Aarne Vesilind and Susan M. Morgan, *Introduction to Environmental Engineering* (Belmont, California: Brooks/Cole—Thomson Learning, 2004); Kevin Sharpe and Rebecca Bryant, “Providence and the Biology of Purpose,” *Cross Currents* 52, no. 3 (2002): 371-384; and Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Charles G. Haws, “Suffering, Hope, and Forgiveness: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62, no. 4 (2009): 477-489.

As we grow, we help other people to learn about their humanity through our living and loving. This is all a very active process, which any one of us can be a part of, even those that we might otherwise overlook or view as having less value than others.

One such example was that of lawyer Harriet McBryde Johnson, a woman severely crippled and wheelchair-bound, who has since died. There have been people, such as Princeton University philosopher, Peter Singer, who have advocated that parents should have the option of having their disabled babies killed in order to prevent their future suffering and the pain their lives will cause others.<sup>10</sup> After all, what real purpose could their lives have?

But during her professional life, Johnson passionately debated with individuals, such as Singer, about their assumptions that those with disabilities necessarily suffer from their handicaps, experience a poorer quality of life, and contribute less to human communities than healthier people.<sup>11</sup> She tirelessly advocated for the right of people with disabilities to be considered as equals to those in society without handicaps. In her doing so, Johnson prompted people to examine their humanity and think about the humanity of others. She fulfilled a great purpose in life. Her wisdom meant something to those she represented, as well as those who heard her message.

Our capacity to educate others about their humanity doesn't require us to do anything. We don't have to be highly educated or influential. Many times, it is our mere presence and the anticipation that we will be a part of a family or community that serves as our purpose in life. For instance, I think about the grand-daughter that Kay and I lost almost 9 years ago. Little Tiara, born premature, died within three days of her birth. All she could do was to struggle to live. What was the purpose of her tiny life? The fact that she had been conceived and the excitement of her impending birth helped her parents to see themselves and their place in the world in a new and better light. She brought promise and possibility, which lingers on in the lives of her family. Their humanity was enriched because she lived, even briefly. In truth, she meant something to all of us.

This life purpose has its origin in God, who brought this world and its creatures, including us, into existence. What's more, the Holy One provides us with yet two other grand purposes. First, God seeks to love us. Indeed, as the text of Isaiah 43:4 tells us, God calls us precious and beloved. And just as importantly, God wants us to return that love to the Holy One. Second, God desires that each of us will be expressions of the Holy One's character in the world for the wellbeing of all. To accomplish these things, God has built into us an urging to seek out our Creator and Sustainer and

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<sup>10</sup> Harriet McBryde Johnson, "Unspeakable Conversations or How I Spent One Day as a Token Cripple at Princeton University," *The New York Times Magazine* (February 16, 2003): 50-55, 74, 78-79.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

enter into relationship. Protestant Reformer, John Calvin, referred to this searching for God as the *sensus divinitatis*.<sup>12</sup> It is something that once acknowledged, we continue to pursue. Even if we turn away from God, we still look to find the sacred in our lives.<sup>13</sup> However, when we learn to enter into communion, a deep relationship with God and the divine realm, we find love, compassion, wholeness, and peace. We learn as well, how to bring those things into our everyday lives and teach others about them through our words and deeds.<sup>14</sup> In turn, we give back to God our devotion and presence, in which God delights, as noted in Jesus' parables of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) and the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10).

Our lives have purpose because we are interconnected with everything, sacred and worldly. We have a role in shaping the humanity of people around us, just as was done for us. In our communion with God, whatever form it might take, God enjoys and loves us for who we are, and desires us to be channels of holy love, compassion, and wisdom. Everyone has a purpose because we exist in God's universe and by our being human to the best of our ability, given the talents we each possess.

Knowing that we have purpose helps us to find meaning in life. However, that self-serving knowledge is not sufficient for most people.<sup>15</sup> We could selfishly and unconsciously embrace our purposes in life, like other creatures. There must be something more required of us for our lives to have meaning and our experience of wholeness.

The answer to this is presented in the passage of Ephesians 2:10 (New International Version), which remind us that the Holy One offers us salvation, renewal in the following of Jesus' example, "to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." In other words, by continually seeking out a relationship with God through a strengthening prayer life, and the development of a greater commitment to live in love, compassion, and service, as Jesus did, our natural purpose is transformed. We discover a gracious order in the universe, a clear sense of personal identity, and a wider awareness of our social world. Our lives take on a larger, sacred purpose, to be ever growing reflections of God's presence in creation. For some, this is the definition of meaning in life.<sup>16</sup>

You have a purpose in life. This has been true for all of our ancestors, the people we once knew, those we know now, and those who are yet to be. Each of you has decided to strengthen your

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Helm, "John Calvin, the *Sensus Divinitatis*, and the Effects of Sin," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43, no. 2 (1998): 87-107.

<sup>13</sup> Newberg and Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Neal Krause, "God-Mediated Control and Change in Self-Rated Health," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 20 (2010): 267-287.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

relationship with God and dedicate your lives to being disciples of Jesus Christ. Therefore, each of your lives has even greater meaning. And, if the challenges of life should ever cause you to doubt that you have purpose and significance, then remember that through your connectedness, you've meant something to someone, you've been loved, and you've helped to transform an Aldonza into a Dulcinea. Amen.