



From the Pulpit: May 19, 2024

Pentecost—Children's Day

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Matthew 22:34–40

What's Saving Your Life Right Now? VII: The Practice of Living with Purpose: Vocation

There are two things you should know about today: first it is Children's Day, the day we recognize young people, third and fourth graders who spend the year learning scripture by heart, by gifting them with a personalized Bible. According to old newsletters I found, this tradition has been going on for more than 90 years. The second thing you should know is that this is the last sermon in our series based on Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *An Altar in the World*, that asks the question, "What is Saving your Life Right Now?" The answer to that question today is: "Living with Purpose".

Barbara Brown Taylor is a priest and a writer. She also says that she has been a babysitter, a cheese packer, a horseback riding instructor, a waitress, and a teacher. Someday she wants to be a zookeeper and member of the circus.¹ When she was a young adult she thought that there was one thing that God wanted her to do. The problem was that she didn't have a clue what that thing was. So she started praying on a fire escape in her neighborhood. She went up the creaking metal steps night after night. She prayed with words, she prayed with silence, she prayed with wolf howls when she ran out of words and silence.

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Finally she understood what God wanted her to do: love God and love neighbor. She was looking for something more specific, maybe for God to say, “be a priest” or “join the circus.” But instead of being directed to a job, she received a vocation, a call, a summons from God.

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In Matthew's Gospel one of the Pharisees, an expert in the law, asked Jesus a question to test him.

“Teacher which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

¹ Barabara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 107–108.

Kenilworth Union Church roots its mission in two verses: Micah 6:8 and the Greatest Commandment from Matthew's gospel we just heard. These are carved in stone over the cloister walk. When Jesus was asked this trick question, he knew the answer because he grew up learning scripture. Maybe his youth leaders said something like what we say every Wednesday night at youth group: here in this church we have one rule and it is the only rule we need. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

Love God. Love neighbor. So simple and easy to remember. Barbara Brown Taylor isn't the first person to point out that we can love God and love our neighbor no matter what we are doing: playing soccer, taking out the trash, having recess on the playground, going to school, or working as an investment banker or making milkshakes at Dairy Queen.

DQ Boss—Loving God whatever you do:

Speaking of Dairy Queen, let me tell you about my first job when I was fifteen years old. It was a sticky job. I went home every day covered in ice cream splatter. Evenings were spent ringing orders after summer ball games ended and the line was out the door. But my boss, the owner of the Dairy Queen, had a rule that defied all logic: Don't wash the red plastic trays. Wipe them with a cloth, he said, but don't wash them. I tried my best to wipe them clean but ketchup and ice cream are hard to get out of the grooves. I was worried that the grime might make customers sick. So I would wait until the middle of the day when there were no customers and the owner left to take his break. Then I would sneak the trays to the sink to wash them in hot, soapy water and rinse them in the disinfecting basin. I also told my family and friends not to eat there which may be why I only worked there one summer. But my point is this: you can find a way to love your neighbor in any job you have or any activity you do.

Loving God and loving neighbor is simple but it isn't always easy. Not everything and everyone God loves is easy to love. Take cicadas for example. The other day I saw one of the first cicadas on the sidewalk. Cicadas don't bother me, in fact I find them a bit fascinating. The kids I was with wanted to squish it and looked at me very doubtfully when I said that the cicada is part of God's creation and God loves it. God loves mosquitos. God loves all kinds of creeping

crawling things. God even loves the person who posts terrible things on social media about the person we can't stand. Loving God and loving neighbor is simple but it isn't always easy. That's why we need a community of people, a church, to help us practice our vocation in everyday life.

Allen Menke was also a man who had many jobs: he was a star basketball player at Purdue, he taught thermal dynamics at West Point, he was an engineer, and he owned

a furniture business. Here at Kenilworth Union Katie Lancaster remembers that "he was a quiet, gentle partner in our ministry to children. He was a man who loved life, loved those around him, and showed that love with a smile, a story, and a hug. Somehow, somewhere along the way he and his wife decided that they wanted to support the Third Grade Bible Program together. And so they did." Their legacy gift that makes sure that third graders will always receive a Bible after they learn *The 10 Commandments*, *The 23rd Psalm*, *The Beatitudes*, *The Lord's Prayer*, and *The Greatest Commandment*.

I also want to tell you about those who love others by teaching Sunday school. It takes at least 12 volunteers each week, 40 people every year to run our Sunday School—from high school helpers to parent teachers to people who just plain love working with our kids. They show up to be part of this holy work. Each of them shows how to love God and love neighbors in their own particular way.

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Fifth and sixth graders are receiving their service award today for loving God and neighbor by leading in chapel, packing kits for migrants, making cards for college students, repainting the labyrinth, and collecting and sorting books and games for the outreach agency, Family Promise.

These are just a few of the ways this congregation works together to share God's love in this church, this community, and in the Chicago area.

Our purpose is: love God and love neighbor and thanks be to God there are many examples of how we can live into our vocations. I'm going to end by talking about why we follow Jesus' Greatest Commandment; it is because God loves us and wants us to live fully. The third graders learn *The 23rd Psalm* where God is described as a shepherd who provides what we need, strengthens and protects us, and surrounds us with goodness and mercy all the days of our life. Or as the children's song goes, "we love, because God first loved us."

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Arthur Brooks explains that having purpose in our lives is important to our happiness.² Brooks has also had a lot of jobs: French horn player, economist, non-profit leader, and now a professor at Harvard where he teaches about leadership and happiness. One of you recommended his book *Strength to Strength* to me last year. Oprah is the co-author of his most recent book *Build the Life You Want*.

Brooks describes happiness not as a feeling, but as a meal. The table he sets before us has three ingredients: enjoyment, satisfaction, and purpose. **Enjoyment** is not just pleasure, it is fun in the company of others and making memories together. **Satisfaction** is the feeling you get when you work toward a goal—like memorizing scripture by heart, or passing your test after studying, or making the quota at work. It is the look for a third grader who high fives me when they've completed the last memory verse. **Our purpose**, loving God and neighbor, gives our life direction and meaning.

The enjoyment of having fun together and making memories, the satisfaction of learning scripture by heart, the purpose we find in Jesus' Greatest Commandment, these are Brooks' essential ingredients for happiness, and they are also the secret sauce of the third grade Bible year. Thanks be to God for the possibility of a lifetime of true happiness rooted in God's purpose for our lives.

²Brooks talks about the ingredients of happiness in books, articles, and on the "Ten Percent Happier Podcast" here: <https://www.tenpercent.com/tph/podcast-episode/arthur-brooks-754>

—Prayers of the People— Squire Prince

Divine Spirit, God of every tongue, nation, and person (young and old), we come before your presence with thanksgiving and we enter into your courts with praise!

We thank you Lord for this day in which we remember that great moving Spirit that shifts among us and within us. We remember that you have manifested yourself around us, with that Spirit of Ruach, of breath, that speaks love, grace, and mercy to our hearts. As we celebrate our children and youth today Lord God, we think about how your Spirit is at work within and around them, just as much as within and around those saints within our midst who are seasoned and wise with experience. Lord, we celebrate those words from the writer that says “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams” Today we rejoice over all of our children, with their unique personalities, and their diverse talents. We thank you for their questioning, their curiosity, and their laughter. We thank you for their joy during the catacombs matches that take over this whole church building. We thank you for their voices raised in singing and collective ringing. We thank you for their prayer request that reminds us that they see beyond themselves to those who rejoice and mourn. May we all become as these young saints, seeking to experience the fullness of your Spirit which is joy, peace, love, and so much more.

As we seek to be prophets, visionaries, and dreamers, we look to create a world that is able to reach across those lines that divide us, to grab hold of our neighbors in love, and share in humanity with each other. We stand with those who mourn, and we rejoice with those who are jumping for joy. We pray that violence would not be our motivator, but that love would guide our thinking. We pray for that peace that surpasses all understanding to move in our midst. We pray for peace in Palestine and Gaza; we pray Lord for the ending of bloodshed and hostage situations, we pray for a reunification of families and the mending of broken hearts,

we pray for your mighty rushing wind to blow away the chaffs of hate and hurt. For our siblings of humanity in the Ukraine, let there be peace that comforts them as they rebuild and restore. For our siblings of humanity in the Congo, restore hope for peace and life flowing abundantly. For our own country, for the divisions, schism, and infighting. Let us continue to recognize the humanity and belovedness of those around us. Let us never forget that you formed us by your hands, and you look at us and call us very good. In the midst of the pain of violence, war, and oppression, we continue to rejoice in resistance. We rejoice not to avoid the pain of reality, but to call into reality that which we know can be. We rejoice because we know there is a Spirit moving among us, that is softening hearts, breaking oppressive powers, and calling for justice. There is a Spirit resting within each of us, our children, and the next generations, that will continue to change the tide of our world with radical love, indescribable peace, and untameable grace.

Lord we thank you for that great Spirit that brings us together, that embraces our uniqueness and our diverse languages, and calls us to this uniqueness within a unified body. Lord you have called us into this beautiful mosaic of wanderers; questioning, wrestling, rejoicing, mourning, and breathing. We breathe in that fresh breath of life, the Ruach of your Spirit today. We breathe in your Spirit, as we breathe out together, in one voice, the prayer that Jesus taught by saying: Our Father.... Amen.

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