



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

Good Advice

Sermon for the 19th Sunday after Pentecost, September 25, 2016

Readings: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

Sermon text: He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Luke 16:31

Here is a short meditation from the brothers of the [Society of St John the Evangelist](#) in Cambridge Massachusetts (I get one in my email every morning; this is from 9/24/2016):

Cultivate.

Prayer springs from our life, and our life is a gift from God. If we are dissatisfied, off-centered, discontented, feeling malaise – where nothing is right with our self or the world – it's because we have been negligent not just about our prayer but about our life in general. Gifts require cultivation.

-Br. Curtis Almquist Society of Saint John the Evangelist

Practitioners in other lines of work offer different forms of advice. In the book [Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life](#), Silicon Valley designers and Stanford University teachers Bill Burnett and Dave Evans suggest that the way industrial designers approach design problems works well for life design. There are many potentially good design solutions (life possibilities), but they need to be imagined, tried out, tested, rejected, tweaked and worked on collaboratively. Their five major suggestions: Be curious, try stuff, reframe problems, know it's a process, and ask for help.

Whether using the approach of design/build or pray/cultivate, both spiritual and secular teachers agree that we bear a personal responsibility for our own life and happiness. Many things in life are given, imposed and uncontrollable. But other parts of our life are choices, attitudes and actions that we can make and take to forge a new way through the wilderness. There is not one path alone; but we have to conceive of the possibilities and exercise our gifts.

In *Designing Your Life* readers (or students) are asked to write out a short *Workview* and *Lifeview* as key steps in figuring their *Compass*—their understanding of what is worth doing in the world, what values and principles matter and why.

The questions they offer to stimulate thinking about one's *Workview* are simple: Why work? What's work for? The authors encourage their readers to write out a short answer of no more than 250 words. Here's mine:

Work is the way we contribute our time and energy and skills to the world; work is what we do. Work is also what we get paid for. The way we pay our bills. To work is a way to be a productive part of the community and to be self and family supporting. Sometimes you can work and not get paid—family care, volunteer work. Sometimes you can get paid and not be truly productive—or even productive of harm rather than good to the community and world. Humanity as a whole may be harming the earth's overall good of species diversity. So we should if we can find work that contributes to the good of the world and the community. Work that if possible we get paid for and which supports our family and allows a decent amount of leisure and travel. Work that allows us to use our skills and gifts—as now I get to cultivate gifts of thinking, speaking, planning, community and leadership building, and counseling. As a carpenter I used less of these and also worried about whether some of the projects I built were truly helpful to the world, though desired by the clients.

So my answer in a nutshell to the question, what is work for? is that work contributes good to the world, pays the bills, and challenges and satisfies the self.

The exercise exploring *Lifeview* is similar. But the questions are more profound: Why are we here? What is the meaning or purpose of life? What is the relationship between the individual and others? Where do family, country and the rest of the world fit in? What is good and what is evil? Is there a higher power, God or something transcendent, and if so, what impact does this have on your life? What is the role of joy, sorrow, justice, injustice, love, peace and strife in life?

My answer: I believe in God and consequently a universe filled with meaning and purpose, though not always clearly so. I believe we have an ultimate duty to search for and get closer to the heart and will of God, source of transcendent truth, meaning and purpose. This search prioritizes all other pursuits in life. As Jesus put it, "Seek first the kingdom of God." Then other goods, such as family, work, service to country, personal success, will fall into place (idolatry is placing other goods first). Ultimately the world is going someplace, toward God's final goal of uniting "heaven and earth" into a new creation. As Jesus prayed to the Father: your will be done, on earth as in heaven. This new creation, what Jesus called the kingdom of God, is already here within and among us, in seed and first fruits, and we are called to help spread the word and cultivate love. This process and progress is not without challenge and struggle against our propensity to love self above God and others, our freedom to choose evil and allow injustice, and natural suffering and death. But the ultimate goal of harmony, joy and peace will be reached, though only in its fullness after death in the eternal dimension of God's love and being. Faith in this belief gives me hope and endurance through suffering and setbacks. The call to love God and neighbor sets my moral compass. I try to follow Jesus' teaching and example.

So far, we have talked about making choices, trying out ways of life, as if all ways were equally valid; as if there are many paths up the mountain but we are all trying to reach the same summit. But some paths may be wrong, do damage, lead to a fall. And not everyone wants to climb that mountain. People in different conditions of life, and during different periods of history, have a range of choices; some are commendable, some condemnable.

Take Lazarus and the Rich Man in this morning's gospel. Lazarus has died and gone to heaven—he is comforted in the bosom of Abraham, his illustrious ancestor. The Rich Man has died and gone to hell, where part of his suffering involves seeing that Lazarus, the wretched beggar who used to sleep at the gate of his mansion, is now enjoying comfort while he endures a terrible thirst. Could Lazarus bring him a glass of water? No, the gulf is now fixed and uncrossable. Could he then go warn his brothers of the fate that awaits them unless they change their ways? No, they would not listen even to a man raised from the dead if they do not already heed the well known teachings of Moses and the prophets.

We are not told whether Lazarus had much choice in how he came to be so miserable in life. The story simply suggests that his sufferings in this life are not his whole life. There is another life—life in God, life in the bosom of Abraham. This is the promise of the beatitudes: blessed are those who suffer, for they will be comforted.

We are aware that the Rich Man had options; he is condemned for his lack of response to the misery of Lazarus. He could have provided comfort to the poor man and did not; he was right there at his gate. So the moral is clear and often articulated in the teaching of Jesus—if you hope to receive mercy, do not neglect opportunities to show mercy; forgive others as you pray to be forgiven for your transgressions.

Another thought to ponder: The saying that “it is never too late” is not supported by this parable. We have this life in which to act, and how we act makes a difference in our relationship with God, our eternal life. There may well be many good paths to take, many possible good life designs. But there are also paths it is best not to take.

This morning's biblical teaching may be summed up in the words of Paul to his young disciple Timothy. Tell people to “do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”

“The life that really is life” sounds like “a well-lived joyful life” to me. So my advice? Listen to good teachers like Burnett and Evans. Take some time to reflect and write out your *Workview* and *Lifeview*. Be curious, try stuff, reframe problems, know it's a process, and ask for help. Also attend to the wisdom of religious teachers such as Br Curtis: Pray and cultivate your gifts. Heed the teachings of Moses and the prophets. Above all, take heart. Remember that God loves you and Jesus has shown you a good and life-giving way.

So go forth into the world rejoicing in the power of the Spirit. In Christ's name, Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector
Grace Church, Millbrook, NY