

Message: Your Life Speaks To Others

We experience life in different ways. Søren Kierkegaard said, “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.”¹ Pastor John Ortberg says it this way, “There is purpose in your past.”²

To be clear, I believe the Holy Spirit uses your life experiences. We all come to church with emotional, mental, physical and spiritual baggage. Part of our uniqueness is founded in the different ways we experience life. Spouses, married for a few years or decades, have different experiences. Children raised in the same home have different experiences. Studies even have shown that identical twins, often the closest of all relationships, have different experiences.

There is a common basis in all of these cases. Our experiences are different because we see and understand life through different lenses. We have different passions, abilities and personalities. Our birth order makes a difference. Our family history makes a difference. We’re each unique creations, made by God to experience the joy and suffering of life. The psalmist tells us, “*For it was you [God] who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made*” (Psalm 139:13-14a).

Like any good masterpiece, the work takes time to perfect. An artist begins by covering a frame, stretching the canvas. Part of the artist’s preparation is to remove wrinkles before the surface can be treated and made ready for paint. We’re the same. God has created a frame for our lives. We’re given different spiritual gifts. But we have to be stretched and pulled to fit that frame. It takes us out of our comfort zone. Our hesitations are removed and we eventually find ourselves on our knees, praying to Jesus for forgiveness. That’s when we’re prepared and ready for the Holy Spirit to truly paint our lives with the colors of new life.

God uses all of our experiences to craft the masterpiece of our lives. Here’s an illustration that may help. Imagine yourself walking down a long hallway. On the walls are paintings that reflect moments that

¹ Erik Rees, S.H.A.P.E., Zondervan, 2006, p.95

² Ibid, p. 96

shaped and changed your life: childhood joys and sorrows, the pain and thrill of being a young adult, the struggle and achievements of our adult lives. On one side of the hallway are portraits of experiences that brought you excitement, achievement and fulfillment. On the other side hang pictures of experiences that caused you pain, frustration and remorse. Walking slowly down the hallway, looking carefully at each painting, is an important step toward understanding who God has created you to be and discovering the purpose God set aside for you.³

If you’ve never done this kind of personal reflection, I invite you to do so. If you can’t think of any lessons you’ve learned from your experiences, ask God to reveal them to you. God wants to use everything in your life. This kind of breakthrough isn’t obvious or easy. We have to be open and transparent with God. We need to celebrate the good things and lay claim to our hurt and pain. We have to be willing to go below the surface and spend time thinking about the significant moments of our lives. When you do, you’ll be ready to lay them before God. That’s when we grow. It’s how we give honor to God.

One note of advice comes from Arthur Miller, Jr., a leading personal development coach. When you are reviewing your life, look at two basic elements. First, those things that gave you a sense of satisfaction, regardless of what other people thought. And second, the things you feel you did well, regardless of how much significance others see in them. This is a different view of success. Many of the things that are fulfilling and significant to God are not things the world would embrace.

I invite you to think about your past, life-shaping experiences in five areas. We’ve provided a handout for you to take home to help you reflect on your life experiences. They reflect our question for the day: what personal, vocational, relational, educational and spiritual experiences have I had?

³ *Ibid*, p. 97

Let’s reflect on these kinds of experiences:

- **Personal** – what kind of recognition has been meaningful to you?
- **Vocational** – what kind of service do you excel at? Production, sales, leadership, customer service, crafts, etc.
- **Relational** – how does your marriage or certain friendships comfort you or challenge you to excellence?
- **Educational** – what degrees and training have helped you develop and grow?
- **Spiritual** – what success have you had sharing your faith or leading others to deeper insight or finding deeper acceptance of Christ that leads you to a sense of something beyond the common?⁴

I invite you to spend some time this week reflecting on how God was present and guiding you during times of success and achievement and during times of pain and frustration or failure. For some of you, this won’t be hard. You’re naturally more reflective. For others, this will be more difficult. You’re naturally more gregarious. Start alone, with God. But for those of you who are verbal thinkers, finding a good friend to share with may help. A note: this is not a thinking exercise, just for your mind. Listen to what your heart says. After all, you’ve lived through these experiences.

Last week, I shared a truth:

You are responsible for the well-being of your own soul.

Embracing the way God uses our experiences, we’re learning a new truth: our lives serve as a witness of our love of God and others.

How does that work? Whether we’re conscious of it or not, God opens doors for us to connect with others through our experiences. In fact, it’s one of the reasons all seminary students are required to participate in two quarters of clinical practice. The goal is for those who are looking to serve in ministry to discover how God can use them – just the way they are, warts and all, to connect with other people in real, meaningful ways. The second thing you find out is that there’s almost no one that you can’t connect with. We all have common ground. This is not

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 98

exclusive to pastor or seminary students. It’s a lesson for all of us, as God’s agents who live in the world.

Now, I don’t know your background or life history. No one does. Even your spouse doesn’t know some of your experiences. But God does. Trust God to lead you and use you. After all, God has equipped you with spiritual gifts to succeed. God has given you a heart filled with passion to connect to others. God has given you skills and natural abilities. And God has given you a wonderfully unique personality. Best of all, God knows what you’ve gone through in your life.

Become who God made you to be. That’s it, simple and clear. That’s your God-given SHAPE.

There’s one thing that’s true in all of our experiences, good and bad. God said, “*I will never leave you or forsake you*” (Hebrews 13:5). That means God was present when we felt like we were on top of the world. God was also present when we felt like we were ready for the grave. When we walk down the long hallway of our lives and reflect on the portraits, keep in mind that God is present in all of them.

Paul tells us, “Don’t lost heart” (2 Corinthians 4:1b). God gives us the opportunity to connect with others to help us. When we connect to another person, we become God’s agent. We help others see the light of Christ in their darkness. We offer hope. There’s a powerful, restoring strength in that kind of love. It’s the kind of love that’s patient, kind, gentle, joyful and steady (Galatians 5:22).

Paul taught us about our condition, “*All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it’s not only around us; it’s within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We’re also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don’t see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.*”

Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God’s Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don’t know how or what to pray, it doesn’t matter. [God] does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. [God] knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That’s why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.” (Romans 8:22-28, The Message). We’re ready and waiting for the new life we will have when God’s kingdom arrives. In the meantime, the Spirit is at work doing good in, with and through our lives.

The Holy Spirit often puts us in situations where the pain, sorrow and frustration of our past connect us with another person’s current pain, sorrow and frustration. Maybe you’ve wrestled with addictions. Your experiences open doors to sharing with others who may be wrestling to find answers. Maybe you’ve wrestled with difficult family relationships. Your experiences open doors to sharing with others, hearing their hurts and offering help or insights. Maybe you’ve experienced the pain and grief of untimely death of a loved one. Your experiences open doors to sharing with others whose emotions and lives are raw and filled with questions.

Let me let you in on something. There’s a secret to this kind of love: sharing your experiences not only helps those who are in pain. It helps you, too. Depositing love in others deposits love in God. And that, in turn, deposits love in us. It helps us to continue with our healing and recovery. That’s how spiritual maturity works. It’s why people become mentors in Alcohol Anonymous and other groups. Helping others helps us. That’s God’s love in action.

Finally, let me conclude this series. God has blessed you. Pass it on. Be a blessing to others. No matter what you’ve wrestled with, there’s someone outside the walls of our church who’s going through the same thing, with one, BIG difference. They don’t have the hope that you have. They don’t have a life-giving relationship with Jesus. They don’t have God’s Spirit giving them a moment to breathe and find peace. They need God. God is sending you, just as you are. You’re made by

God, saved by Jesus and equipped by the Holy Spirit to go. Follow your heart. Use your natural abilities and skills. Let your personality shine. Learn and share from your experiences. When you do, you'll find your life and love of God will become more fulfilling and effective.

Become who God made you to be. It's a wonderful way to live!

Let us pray...

“Dear God, thank you for making us. We are wonderful, unique expressions of your love, made in your divine image. Give us ears to hear your call and the courage to use your gifts. Give us eyes to look at our home, family, neighbors and community in a fresh, new way. Ignite a passion in our hearts to love others as you have loved us. Fill us with the courage we need to use our abilities in your name. Make us more comfortable with who we are, how we relate to others and the way we see opportunities. Open doors for us to share our life experiences with those who are hurting, so they can find hope in you. Show us that all things are possible with Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.”

Psalm 106:1-6, 47-48 (CEB)

Praise the LORD!

Give thanks to the LORD because he is good,
because his faithful love endures forever.

Who could possibly repeat all of the LORD’s mighty acts
or publicly recount all his praise?

The people who uphold justice,
who always do what is right, are truly happy!
Remember me, LORD, with the favor you show your people.

Visit me with your saving help
so I can experience the good things your chosen ones experience,
so I can rejoice in the joy of your nation,
so I can praise along with your possession.

We have sinned - right along with our ancestors.
We’ve done what is wrong.
We’ve acted wickedly.

LORD our God, save us!
Gather us back together from among all the nations
so we can give thanks to your holy name
and rejoice in your praise!

Bless the LORD, the God of Israel,
from forever ago to forever from now!
And let all the people say, “Amen!”

Praise the LORD!

Romans 8:24-28 (CEB)

We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience.

In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God's will. We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:22-28 (The Message)

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