

SEARCHING FOR SIGNIFICANCE

To a large extent, where and how we choose to live will be determined by the circumstances in which we feel our lives to have the most significance.

Who will love Judith Bucknell? What a haunting epitaph to the death that untold thousands go through daily. It was a story in the Miami Herald about the discovered diary of a woman who had been murdered. In it, she told of her struggle to find love while maintaining the appearance of success. Over and over, she expressed doubt as to whether she would ever matter to anyone. It was a vivid reminder of the death of hope that occurs in our world each time the search for significance fails. Pop culture says that I am a rock, I am an island unto myself. But the soul cries out and says, "Surely, I must matter to someone." "Surely, there is a reason for my existence."

We often hide this search behind carefully contrived facades. We once knew a lady who was unique in our experience. While we enjoyed the hilarity of her company, we also assumed that something was mentally wrong with her. For several years, it seemed that her facade was real, that she had no depth, and nothing could get close or truly touch her. We were eventually privileged to see beyond the mask. The real surprise came as our years together were coming to an end. In a school assignment, on a survey form that she had filled out anonymously (sort of), a question had been asked. "What, if anything, wakes you up in the middle of the night, truly afraid?" Her reply gave a glimpse into a side of her, and most people, that is rarely seen. "I'm afraid that the people I love will pass through my life, never knowing how much they meant to me."

This receiving and giving of love are often vital elements of a meaningful life. A friend once asked whether it was a greater feeling to love or to be loved. We were not sure at the time, but feel we could answer now. We believe it is a better feeling to be loved. When we are loved, there is far less risk involved. We are secure in the knowledge that we truly matter to someone else. In this instance, we are not only happy, we are in more or less control of whether that emotional high continues. There is a real deception though, in searching for significance in the feelings of others. This satisfaction is based on circumstances and people that are ultimately uncontrollable. Withdrawal of that affection leaves scars and too many scars tend to add up to a pretty tough shell. This offers protection, but is more effective at isolation and loneliness.

Given the temporal nature of being loved, we believe it is a far greater accomplishment to love. We have come to define love as the state in which someone else's happiness means more to us than our own does. The author of the Bible, in John 15:13, defines the ultimate expression of love as giving your life for your friend. He would go on to prove His love in exactly that fashion. Curiously enough, it is this same sacrifice of life and self that we believe is the ultimate goal of a search for significance.

A significant life is composed of levels of service. Life has been compared to an onion. Like the vegetable, we are composed of layers that make up a complex whole. One layer is as ministers of the Word of God. We are husband and wife to one another, but parents to others. There are some that we work for, while others work for us. At one level, we are servants. In another, we command. We are coaches, team players, students, and teachers. All of these various aspects that define us are based upon the identity that we assume with those to whom we give of ourselves. We are not one aspect, but the sum total of our parts.

Supposing we decided to just live for ourselves. We could leave it all behind us and walk away in a search to find our identities. We could abandon our responsibilities, divest ourselves of guilt, and live to gratify our every whim. We could listen to the bombardment of advertising and depend upon marketing experts to tell us what success is. We could systematically absolve ourselves of every obligation we have assumed in order to liberate ourselves. We are afraid though, that we would ultimately find that just like the onion, when all of the layers are gone, nothing is left. We prefer to love, for only then will our lives in this world matter. If those obligations create a little wear and tear, we find that like the velveteen rabbit, the scuff marks just make us more real.

We have also discovered that our lives can have eternal significance. It has been said that what we do for ourselves will die with us, but what we do for others will outlive us. The scriptures indicate that it is what we do for Christ that will last. Jesus stated accurately that what the woman did for Him with the alabaster box would be spoken of forever. Giving our possessions, our goals, and our lives to Jesus, adds whole new layers to our existence.

Service is more a matter of willingness than of excellence. Yet we hesitate to give of ourselves in any degree because we either feel unworthy to serve with our meager talents, we are waiting to be asked, or worse, we are waiting for an assignment we feel lives up to our self image. The conductor, Leonard Bernstein, is quoted as saying that the hardest instrument to play was second fiddle. No glory, but without it, there is no harmony. Waiting to be asked to serve in our own church is like a member of the family waiting to be asked to pull the weeds out of the front sidewalk. It gives us a poor excuse for doing nothing at the expense of really irritating the Father. Being unwilling to invest our resources or time in the needs of others has got to disturb our God of compassion. The spirit of Cain in our world says that we are not our brother's keeper. But Jesus said that any one we saw with a need, they were our neighbor and were to be loved.

Giving our lives in service to Jesus Christ is not losing them. Nor is it a small matter to the Creator of the universe. Our sacrifice will not be meaningless to Christ or fail to get His attention. He will notice every hair that falls from our heads. Our prayers go up before Him as sweet smelling incense. Isaiah 59:1 assures us His ear is not deaf that He cannot hear us or His arm short that He can not help us. He has already shown the greatness of His love for us. He called us friends when He gave His life for us.

It is easy to consider His life and death as an interesting episode in history that has no relevance to us or our needs. The problem is that His sacrifice is not necessarily over and done with. Jesus made a statement that only makes sense if He is God and not subject to the dominion of time or confined to a linear existence. He said in John 8:58, "before Abraham was, I am". We believe He was saying that at the same instant He was talking with his disciples, He was also living in the time before Abraham. If we are right, then somewhere right now, there is an earthly form of God that is raising weary eyes from the soldiers at His feet. He is looking at us in our desperate search for life's meaning and deciding not to come off the cross after all. We believe He is deciding that we are worth hanging in there for.

That level of loving and giving always carries a certain risk, of course. God knows that when our arms are wide open, our hearts are left unprotected. In filling a need, we might wind up pouring our hearts out. In giving up our cloaks, our own inadequacies might become exposed. In feeding the starving and giving shelter to the needy, our own security and self reliance could be jeopardized. Yet, in the giving of love to those who search for it, a Judith might be saved. The author of divine love would surely approve, and His approval is eternally significant.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What you ever wondered whether you were born for a particular purpose? What the reason for your existence is?
2. How do you become significant in the lives of other people?
3. How many people do you allow to catch glimpses of the real you? Do you act differently depending on whom you are with?
4. Have you ever made a special effort to let those who matter to you, know that they are significant in your life? Would you like those to whom you matter to let you know?
5. Do you think that a part of the reason we don't let such people know is that we are afraid that they might not care, and we do not want to take that risk?
6. Would you say that it is better to love or to be loved? If you had to do without one or the other, which would you give up?
7. Do you feel that the definition given for "love" is accurate? If not, how would you define it? How does the Bible define love?
8. Who can you think of that you serve? Who are some people for whom you fill a needed role? Who would really miss you if you disappeared from their lives?
9. Why do you think that Jesus said that the servant was greater than the master? Which one is needed the most?
10. Each time one of your roles is dropped, i.e., member of the choir, usher, etc., do you feel a sense of loss?
11. Have you ever noticed that in the scriptures, love is not an emotion, but a set of actions? We are commanded to love and emotions cannot be commanded, only actions.
12. Do you feel the ultimate expression of love might be, "I love you with my hands?"
13. What is lost or gained when you give of your time, energy, or talents to someone else? To God?
14. Does it thrill you to be asked to do small tasks? How about large important things? In keeping with scripture, do you do whatever you can find to do, heartily, as unto the Lord? Do you wait to be asked, even when you know something needs to be done?
15. If someone needs to do it, why not you? Is it possible that God brought the need to your attention because He expected you to fill it?
16. To what degree do you feel the needs of others are your responsibility?
17. If we do things that need to be done as unto the Lord, and no one notices or says "Thank You", are we content with God alone being aware of our sacrifice or do we find ways to make sure others know?
18. Is there a need you are aware of that you could fill and the recipient be totally unable to repay you? Will you help?