

“Is there anything else?” A baccalaureate sermon.  
Based on Genesis 1:1-2:3  
Sunday, May 18, 2008.  
Plymouth Congregational UCC.  
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This morning is Baccalaureate Sunday at Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ—a time we recognize and celebrate with those about to graduate. In thinking about it, though, aren't we all graduating from something or other all the time? We move from season to season, we change jobs and we move, we get married and we have babies. Some of us go through a divorce. Some of us are widowed. We retire from jobs and careers. We find new outlets for our gifts and make new friends all the time. We grow and learn, ask questions and seek answers. Through that lens, I preach the Baccalaureate Sermon to everyone gathered here. You all—for today, anyway—are a part of the Class of 2008.

A little housekeeping before we continue: a change in the title of the sermon. Forget “Is there anything else?” The answer to that question will always be: yes. There is a lot more to come. A lot of adventure to be had. A lot of discoveries to be made. A lot of work to do and a lot of play, too.

Instead, I am changing the title to “Are there any questions?” as I think there are few that need addressed on this momentous day. I'm sure some questions have popped into your head in the last few minutes, like: “She's got to be kidding—a baccalaureate sermon for us? Really?” or “Huh. I never noticed that the carvings on the communion table match the carvings in the moldings out in the narthex. I wonder if they did that on purpose?” The subject of graduation may make you even a little sentimental—as it has in our house as one of the kids on the list in your bulletin, you will notice, is a Witmer. If that's the case, you may even be wondering, “I wonder if those kids will be back...?”

Just as quickly as those questions popped into your heads, an answer can come off of the top of mine, too. They are: “No, I'm not kidding—it's good to be reminded of growing and changing no matter where we are in life.” “Yes, the matching carvings are intentional.” And “I hope they are back often—the place won't be the same without them here at home.”

Those kinds of popcorn, distracting questions weren't really what I was thinking of for this morning, though. I was thinking of some questions that have a little more depth, questions more along the lines of "what am I supposed to do with my life" or "why are we here" or "is it true that I am loved no matter what or do you guys just say that because you're supposed to?"

Let's start with "what am I supposed to do with my life..." I hear that one a lot, actually, from those in confirmation, from those about to graduate high school or college, and even from those of you in your 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s (as the definition of Young Adult keeps changing, I'm working with quite an age range...). This is one of those questions that never goes away. So let me tell you what I tell myself when I find this question running through my own mind. Vocation. Vocation. Vocation.

Frederich Buechner describes it like this: A vocation what God calls you to do. It's the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done....the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." You have a calling. A vocation. It would be awful for everyone involved if you didn't use your gifts to make a difference in the world, so listen to your life. Do what makes you happy and meets a need. If you have to have a job just to pay the bills make sure you find other outlets to use your gifts. You'll be glad you did. We'll all be glad you did.

If you need some guidance or a role model to follow, turn to today's scripture reading from Genesis. It's a story you've probably heard a time or two (or twelve) and may even have tuned it out as Anissa read it over this morning. It's long. It's familiar. And after day three or four, it all sort of sound a lot like "yadda...yadda...yadda". It's not background noise, though. It's a glimpse of who God is. And since we're created in God's image (and we are, by the way—every one of us is created in God's image), maybe a glimpse of who God is will give us a glimpse of who we are.

Go back to your bulletin if you need to and take a peek. Better yet, crack open your Bible sometime and read the whole story to find an excellent example of how to live: with gusto and passion, in relationship with others. To me, it looks like God gets up every day and says, "Well—what needs done today?" and then God does it, but not begrudgingly. It seems like God has a lot of fun doing what needs to be done. That's pretty cool. Another thing that is pretty cool:

God steps back when the work is through, takes a good look at everything and says, “Wow. That’s good.” And then God moves on to something else that needs done. Some lessons here: know when a job is finished. Don’t keep tinkering and messing with things. Look at it, call it good, look for what needs done next, and move on. God doesn’t go to day five and say, “Boy, I wish it was still day 3—those were the good old days.” God moves on. So should we. There is a lot more good—and even some “very good” things to come.

Oh, yeah—God does one more important thing here, too: rest. You can’t work all the time. You’ll kill your soul. You’ll ruin relationships. And you’ll do some damage to your physical health, too. Take some time to play. But don’t just play or you’ll do the same. Balance it all out. God did. And that was good.

The “what am I supposed to do with my life…” question often leads into the “why are we even here” question. I’m going to tackle that one with a story that I am going to tell every graduating class from now until I find something that sums it all up better. It’s by another one of my favorite thinkers: Robert Fulghum. In his book “It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It”, he tells this story:

“Are there any questions?” This question is an offer that comes at the end of college lectures and long meetings. It is said when an audience is not only overdosed with information, but when there is no time left anyhow. At times like that you sure do have questions. Like, “Can we leave now?” and “What was that all about?” and “Where can I get a drink?”

The gesture is supposed to indicate openness on the part of the speaker, I suppose, but if in fact you do ask a question, both the speaker and the audience will give you drop-dead looks. And some fool—some earnest idiot—always asks. And the speaker always answers. By repeating most of what has already been said.

But if there is a little time left and there is a little silence in response to the invitation, I usually ask the most important question of all: “What is the Meaning of Life?”

You never know, somebody may have the answer, and I'd really hate to miss it because I was too socially inhibited to ask. But when I ask, it's usually taken as a kind of absurdist move—people laugh and nod and gather up their stuff and the meeting is dismissed on that ridiculous note.

Once, and only once, I asked that question and got a serious answer. One that is with me still.

It was at the last session on the last morning of a two-week seminar when Dr. Alexander Papaderos, our instructor, rose from his chair at the back of the room and walked to the front, where he stood in the bright Greek sunlight of an open window and looked out. We followed his gaze across the bay to the iron cross marking the German cemetery.

He turned. And made the ritual gesture: "Are there any questions?" Quiet quilted the room. These two weeks had generated enough questions for a lifetime, but for now there was only silence.

"No questions?" Papaderos swept the room with his eyes. So...I asked.

"Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?"

The usual laughter followed, and people stirred to go.

Papaderos held up his hand and stilled the room and looked at me for a long time, asking with his eyes if I was serious and seeing from my eyes that I was.

"I will answer your question."

Taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished into a leather billfold and brought out a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter. And what he said went like this:

"When I was a small child, during World War II, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village in Greece. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place.

“I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine—in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

“I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light. But light—truth, understanding, knowledge—is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.

“I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do now know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world—into the black places in the hearts of men—and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.”

And then he took his small mirror and, holding it carefully, caught the bright rays of daylight streaming through the window and reflected them onto my face and onto my hands folded on the desk.

Much of what I experienced in the way of information about Greek culture and history that summer is gone from memory. But in the wallet of my mind I carry a small round mirror still.

And that is the meaning of life: to shine God’s light into all kinds of dark places, reflecting love and hope and grace and peace wherever we go...and to know that we aren’t alone.

Yes, I know—there’s one more question I haven’t answered yet: “Is it true that I am loved no matter what...?” You bet you are. If you have learned nothing else from me or anyone else around this place, I hope you at least know beyond the shadow of a doubt that you are loved. Those words that we speak in worship almost every week (to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves) are something that we really do believe and that we work very hard to live out, no matter what. This is the great commandment that God invites us to live out no matter who we are or where we are on life’s journey. So no matter where

you go or what you do, I hope that you will remember that you are not only supposed to love one another and God first (that's what shining the light is all about), you need to remember that you are loved, too. More than you may ever know.

So, Class of 2008—and remember, that is all of you—receive this blessing:

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain and rejection so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in =this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

And may the Blessing of God the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer be upon you and all those you love this day and forever more.

Amen.