

MISSION POSSIBLE: FINDING YOUR PERSONAL MISSION

Philippians 4:8-9

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
8 October 2017

The Christian faith is a deeply optimistic faith. Our central story is the story of the victory of life over death. As Christians we believe that evil and sin and death never have the last word. The last word is always love. Love always wins.

By optimism, I don't mean putting on rose-colored glasses and pretending to ignore the problems of the world. By optimism, I don't mean burying your head in the sand, or cocooning into your comfort zone.

The optimism of the Christian is an optimism rooted in hope. The hope comes from our knowledge that God is always with us, and that with God, all things are possible. The hope comes from our knowledge that God is always with us, and that therefore, ultimately, there is nothing to fear. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

But these are hard days for optimists, aren't they? The bad news seems to be coming at us so quickly we can barely keep track of it all. It is so tempting to hide, to be distracted, to be numbed, to escape.

And we often seem to romanticize previous periods of history, looking back at them with nostalgia as if other eras were necessarily better, easier, more comfortable than ours. But that's hardly the reality.

In the time and place of Jesus, there was tremendous political turmoil and upheaval. Peasants who were tired of living under the oppressive thumb of the Roman

Empire revolted and sometimes were crucified as a result. Diseases were rampant; the average life expectancy was between 30 and 35.

None of this deterred Jesus from living out his calling. In fact, it could be that the circumstances of his people motivated Jesus to be a stronger advocate, to teach more, heal more, love more.

We bear his name; he is our role model. And so, in difficult times, we look to him as a source of strength and encouragement. His life tells us that the right mission is always possible.

As I study the life of Jesus, I am convinced that it was not easy for him to stay on course. It took work. He intentionally and regularly took time to be alone, to be with God, to be reminded of who he was and what he was called to do.

For all of us, even Jesus, being who we are, being our best selves, takes work and time and intention.

But it is possible. It is possible to find our personal mission, the life we were meant to live. Not only is it possible, it is what God intends for us.

Each of us has been created in the image of God. That means that there is a spark of the divine in each of us. When we find that spark, we begin to find our mission. The spark is the part of you that gives you the most joy. The spark is the place where you feel the most passion. When you are living out of your divine spark, you feel a sense of energy and enthusiasm. (Right as I was finishing this sermon, I came across this quote: “Working hard for something we don’t care about is called stress; working hard for something we love is called passion.”)

If you are having trouble believing that you have a personal mission, or if you are having trouble figuring out what it is, the worst thing you can do is to compare yourself to someone else. Comparing ourselves to others is the quickest way to throw cold water on our own divine spark. I find myself doing it all the time, and chances are, you do too.

Thursday night, at my book club meeting, we were reading about an extraordinary author; she's still writing at the age of 78. She's written novels, graphic novels, all kinds of genres. She's a successful inventor who holds several patents. I found myself thinking, "Why should I even bother to write a few sentences here and there, a blog post every now and then? I'll never be as talented or accomplished as she is." Be careful of comparing yourself to others. Nothing good comes of it. Catch yourself doing it, and immediately change your inner dialogue.

Sometimes we sabotage ourselves by thinking that our personal mission has to be something huge and grand. "My mission is to end world hunger." "My mission is to bring about peace in the Middle East." Maybe your mission is to help our church have the best food drive ever. Maybe your mission is to make sure your elderly neighbor next door has a home-cooked meal once a week. Maybe your mission is to help broker a reconciliation between two feuding family members. The world changes one ripple at a time.

Our mission doesn't stay the same throughout our lifetime. Your mission, at this particular point in your life, might be to nurture your children as safely and gently as possible into adulthood, giving them unconditional love, and giving the world well-adjusted caring human beings. Or maybe your mission is to be a support to your adult children as they are actively parenting. When my children were young, my parents lived several states away. Many times I wished that they lived closer to give me some respite. As a

working mom whose children were hospitalized a few times, I longed for that extra layer of support that would have made things easier.

The mission of this congregation is truly incredible. We are the primary church of support for several county agencies — and we are part of the inner circle of support for several others. We are intimately involved with two agencies that help families who are homeless, post-addiction support homes, Habitat for Humanity, and several others. We couldn't do any of it without some key members of our congregation who have made this work their life's work. A small group of people gathers in our kitchen once a month to prepare a meal for the Haven Center homeless shelter. Sometimes they're joined by others, but basically it's a core group of less than 10 who cooks and delivers, month after month, year after year. Two members of our church have taken on the leadership of coordinating our church's efforts with Habitat for Humanity; their role has made it possible for us to be a part of building a home each of the past several years. One woman in our church has said to me, "As long as there is a need, I will personally make sure that our church opens itself up to homeless families one week every quarter through the Family Promise organization." Without these individuals, we would not be the Mission Central church. It takes a lot of people working, and it takes a few people to step up into leadership positions.

The writer Frederick Buechner says, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Finding your mission is not the same as finding your favorite restaurant or your favorite hobby - there's nothing wrong with those pursuits, but don't expect them to fulfill you. Your mission is the pursuit that brings you joy while also meeting a need.

If you think about the people in your life who have influenced you the most, you may begin to think about mission in a new way. Who was your best encourager? Is there a grandparent who showed you what unconditional love was like? Did you have a teacher who saw something in you that no one else had ever noticed — including you? Did one of your parents show you what it means to give sacrificially? Do you have a friend who has been steadfastly by your side? Are you that person for someone else?

Sometimes our mission is to take care of ourselves, so that we are healthy and whole and available for someone else in their time of need.

Sometimes our mission is showing up, being available to show up. The author Wayne Muller was on a business trip in New York City when he received a phone call from his friend Jim. Jim sounded desperate. “Wayne, I know you’re in New York. My wife Sharon is there, too. She’s also on a business trip, but now she’s in the hospital. I’m halfway across the country. I know it’s asking a lot, but is there any way that you could check on her?”

Sharon had left a meeting in mid-town Manhattan around 3pm. As she walked out of the building, she suddenly collapsed on the sidewalk, with no warning. Had she fainted? Was it a stroke, or worse? People carried her back into the building, called 911, and an ambulance rushed her uptown to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital.

In the taxi, Wayne called the hospital. He spoke with Sharon, who insisted he not come see her. It wasn't necessary, it was too much trouble, she was fine, she didn't need help. Besides, they were just about to discharge her. It would be a waste of his time. An unnecessary late night trip, taking him out of his way, for no good reason.

Wayne went anyway. He reached the E.R., which was noisy and crowded. He found Sharon, lying down, attached to a machine that monitored her blood pressure, her pulse, her blood oxygen levels - all in real time. Every five minutes the machine posted her most recent numbers at the top of a list that scrolled down the screen.

He noted to himself that when he first arrived, her blood pressure was 147 /117.

He sat in a chair a few feet away from where she lay in bed. Sharon was not a shy person. But she was feeling tender, vulnerable. Exposed. He asked about her day, what she remembered, how she was feeling. He glanced at the monitor. Her numbers are 132/105.

He moved his chair a little closer. "Were you scared?" he asked.

She was quiet for a time. Sharon is not prone to public displays of emotion. She was not going to cry.

"Maybe," she offered, tentatively. "Maybe a little. But I feel like I was in a fog. It all happened so fast."

They sat quietly. "Do they know why you fainted? Did they do any tests?"

"They think I was dehydrated. I probably hadn't had much water all day." It was one of those hot, humid summer days in New York.

"They say I just need to rest a while, and drink fluids. They have me hooked up to that thing." There was a water and a saline drip slowly adding water to her system.

The monitor read 119/83 .

They talked some more.

The monitor read: 108/60. This woman was as relaxed as any human being could be - in the middle of the night, in a crowded, noisy emergency room in New York City.

From the moment Sharon knew her friend was coming to see her, her blood pressure had begun to drop. In less than two hours' time, it dropped over forty points. With water, saline, and the restful company of a friend.*

Sometimes, our mission is to show up. Be fully present in the right place at the right time. It can actually be life-saving, to be there for one another. If not physically life-saving, then soul-saving. To know you're not alone during days of grief and anxiety. We need one another. Meeting one another's needs is part of our life's mission.

In the letter to the Philippians, Paul commends to his readers a list of admirable traits. "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Reflect on how you can be more truthful, what truthfulness has meant to you...think of these things. Don't overindulge on a diet of news. Don't watch coverage of one disaster after another. Balance your life by thinking of these things: honor, justice, and excellence. The things we focus on become our reality, they shape our character, they determine our actions. "Be careful," Paul is saying, "about the things you choose as your focus."

And he concludes: "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."

*Reference: Wayne Muller, "The Gentling Power of Our Presence"