

## "TO WHAT END -- FOR WHAT CAUSE?"

a sermon

delivered in

Duke University Chapel

by

The Reverend Robert T. Young  
Minister to the University

September 4, 1977

Scripture Lessons--Old Testament--Ecclesiastes 3:1-14

Gospel--John 18:33-38

-----  
In the name of God who creates us, redeems us and sustains us.  
Amen.

Someone has calculated that by the time a man reaches middle-age, whatever middle-age may be, if he has lived a fairly normal life in these United States, he will have drunk some 2,000 gallons of coffee, and will have eaten some 2,000 steaks. Also, so the word goes, he probably has worn out some 90 pairs of shoes and 50 suits of clothes. (I dare not give an estimate of what it might be for a middle-aged woman.)

But now, this morning, the question for us to consider is this: Is it for this cause that a person comes into the world? To be a consumer, to provide work for the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker? No. There is more to life than that. All of us would agree that there is more, but how much more?

Often we are most unwilling to do some of the important things of life. One of these is that we rarely want to face what I think is a truly inescapable question, namely, "To what end was I born, for what cause did I come into this world?" Or, to what end were you born my friends or for what cause do you think you have come into the world?

Jesus' whole life and ministry revealed the "more" there can be to life. On one occasion, Jesus asked, "Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?" It amazed him that "what shall we eat and what shall we wear?" were more important questions than "how shall we live or what shall we live for?" What is life? Surely more than food or clothing. Surely, much more than many of us, maybe even most of us, have found so far.

Walker Percy writes in his book The Message and the Bottle, and I paraphrase him slightly, "Why are we Americans so sad in the 20th Century?"

Why do we feel so bad when, in this age more than in any other age, we have succeeded in satisfying our needs?

Why do we feel good in bad environments and bad in good environments?

Why have more people been killed in the 20th Century than in all others put together?

Why do people driving around on beautiful Sunday afternoons like to see bloody automobile wrecks?



Why do young people look so sad? The very young people who have sought a new life of joy and freedom."

Why? To what end - for what cause?

We may not want to ask that question, but writers, poets, playwrights, artists all around us today are urging us to ask it. We may be like little Pebbles in the "Flintstones" comic strip.

In a recent comic strip she is seen crawling into the living room where her Mom and Dad are watching television. She sits there on the floor and watches for a few minutes. She sees advertisements one after another on the television screen. After a while she has seen all she can take and she crawls away. The bubbles over her head have her say to herself, "Whew! What is so great about growing up? All I have to look forward to is nagging back aches, sinus headaches, and bad breath."

But we are being called to grow up. To find our end and our cause.

As Gail Sheehy in Passages tells us. I guess this is the experience which causes her to write this particular book. She tells about how she is standing beside a young boy in Northern Ireland, talking with him one minute, and then seeing his head blown to pieces right in front of her very eyes the next minute. Later, she reflects on this and writes, "Take stock! Half of your life has been spent. What about the side of you that wants to contribute to the world?"

Or, as Rameses, son of Pharaoh asked his father in Christopher Fry's Firstborn, "Is there nowhere where I can come upon my own shape, where I am to look for life?"

To what end - for what cause?

Two things about Jesus' life in this regard stand out. One, his primary end and cause was to bear witness to the truth. He bore witness to the truth, the truth about God, the truth about himself, the truth about authentic living. His life revealed indeed that truth will set you free. But, it also revealed that living the truth may cost you your life.

Second, there is perfect congruence in Jesus' life, between the purpose of his life and the living of it. His life and ministry - teaching, healing, preaching - express the end and the cause of his coming. How many persons do you know who, near the end of their lives, could say, "This is the cause for which I was born, this is the end for which I have come into the world" and have it apply to the way in which they have lived out their lives? Not many. A few. Some, maybe. But, not many.

What, then, can we learn from the life of Jesus to help us know our end and our cause?

First, we have to believe that life is worth something, that life is important, that life has value, that there is meaning here.

It is almost as if we are to go back to the creation story to get the sense of value inherent in life. You will recall that in the first creation story, after each day's act of creation, the writer tells us, "And God saw...(whatever it was that God had created that day) and God saw... and God saw... and said, 'It is good.' The next day, God saw... and said, 'It is good.' And the next day, God saw... and said, 'It is good.'" It is clear: God says life is good!



Or, to get the real value that God intends for us to see that there is to human life - your life, my life, everyone's life - we recall that we are created imago dei, in the image of God. Therefore, there is something of ultimate value in every child of God and in all of God's creation.

Or, if we want to come at it another way, we may contrast Jesus' view of life with that view which Koheleth, the writer of Ecclesiastes, talks about in passages not read this morning, but earlier on in Ecclesiastes. Koheleth was a man with a passion for life. He tried everything and ended up totally disillusioned. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," he said. Koheleth also had something to say about academic pursuits. You may be particularly interested in that word this morning. He said, "Of making many books, there is no end. And, much study is a weariness of the flesh." (Well if you don't know that, you will.) And you may want that Scripture reference also. Koheleth apparently worked hard at the pursuit of pleasure and material gain and concluded that all is vanity and all is striving after the wind.

Now the real point is this, Jesus never felt this way about life. Life was not vanity of vanities. There was purpose. There was meaning. In life, Jesus saw and emphasized what William Faulkner would later call "the old universal truths... of love, honor, piety, pride, compassion and sacrifice."

So, if we are to discover our end and our cause we have to believe that life has value.

With life having value and meaning then, in the second place, we have to be willing to invest something of ourselves in it.

Sure, we can go through life as a consumer, only as a taker, only as one who gets or receives or uses, only as a sponge soaking up. I guess it is possible to go through life like that. I seem to recall some men and women and even some young people who treat life that way. But is that living?

If we are to discover and know and fulfill our end and cause, we will have to invest some of ourselves in life. This means that we are not to hold back, but to give. To give, as the prayer puts it, "To give and not to count the cost save the cost of knowing that we do God's will."

This means then to those of you who begin, even to those of you who resume, your life here at Duke this week,

if Duke University is important to you,

if any or all of your classes are important to you,

if that relationship with a particular young man or

a particular young woman is of real value to you,

if learning a new idea or grasping a new concept or

gaining a new insight is important to you,

if gaining a better understanding of yourself is important to you,

if maturing in your commitment to Christ and your response to God means anything at all to you,

if these are worth something of lasting value and

significance to you - to your present and your future,

to our present and to our future -

then you will invest some of your very best self in them.

And, this is the place for us to do that investing, my friend,

this schola, this school, this place where persons are to be free.

This is the place for us to learn to invest ourselves, where we are



free. We are free to hold back, we are free to pick and choose. Pick and choose carefully, my friend, where and how you are going to invest yourself - your mind, your body, your spirit, your energy, your ideas. There are many, many options here. Choose carefully those things of lasting value and then invest yourself.

Jesus was willing to invest himself in life, in his call, in his vocation, in others, in God. And, we are called to do precisely the very same thing. I think Jesus' being willing to invest himself - to preach, to teach, to give, to serve, to love, yes, and to die - was connected to his baptism. That was where he was called and that was where he gave his obedience to God. And that means that your baptism in Christ has a particular and peculiar significance for you. Do you remember your baptism? It was then and there that you gave yourself or you were given fully, totally, wholly, to God. Remember that, as you try to discover your end and your cause.

We have to believe

that life has value,

have to be willing to invest something of ourselves,

and then, we have to learn to live life in the meantime.

In many ways this is the most important thing. This is the real point. Live life, live it now.

I was reading a story the other day about Sissy Spaceck, the bright, young, talented star of "Carrie" and of "Three Women." She says that she began her acting acreeer after her brother died from leukemia, when she was a senior in high school. She says that his loss, "Blew a hole in everything for me and made me aware that we don't always have as much time as we think we do."

For as Roethke writes in his Letters To A Young Poet, "I want to beg of you as much as I can, do not seek answers which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answers."

The point is - live everything!

Is this why the writer of Ecclesiastes says, "For everything there is a time and a season?"

Live everything.

Live your doubts	your faith
your beliefs	your loyalties,
your questions	your fantasies
your adventures	your affirmations
your hopes	your struggles
your loves	your longings.

Live the God who lives in you.

Now. Today. Tomorrow. Don't wait! Do not wait until next year, or until your senior year, or until you graduate, or until you get a 4.0 average, or a date with the most popular or best looking person on campus! Don't wait until you get in grad school or med school or law school or get married or get the best job. Don't wait to begin to live life! No, live it now.

Suppose Jesus had waited to live? He really didn't live very long. Just, suppose he had lived his life waiting, waiting, waiting. Live yours now. For, what if now is all we have, my friend? Live life now.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in one of his sermons has some words I would like to use to close with today, "I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God come what may."

Your end - your cause? - To do the will of God for your life and to live life now! And, in doing and living the will of God we can sing, "Rejoice, the Lord is King; Your Lord and King adore; Rejoice, give thanks and sing and triumph evermore; Rejoice, the Lord is King!"

Amen.