

It's a new year's and a new decade, and I know it's January 5th but I'd like to give you what kids might call an April Fool's Aptitude Test.

This is not just for the sake of humor, but it's a fun test that makes a significant point - namely, that you have to really HEAR the question before you can answer it.

Here's the first one: Why can't a person living in Houston, Texas, be buried east of the Mississippi river?

Answer: Because you don't bury living people!

Try this one: A farmer has seventeen sheep. All but nine die. How many does the farmer have left?

Answer: Nine! They all died except Nine!

Here's one about the Bible: How many different kinds of animals did Moses take on the ark?

Answer: None! Moses didn't take any - it was Noah!

Try this last tricky one: In Texas, can a man marry his widow's sister?

Answer: No, because if he has a widow, he's dead!

The point here is obvious: You must clearly understand what the question is asking before you can answer it properly!

What I want to do this morning is think more carefully and more clearly about a powerful question: a question addressed to Judas in our scripture passage, but one ultimately that all of us have to answer. And no better time than the present—the brand new year—to think about it.

If you remember the scene from this passage. Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The Last Supper is over. The crucifixion is near and Jesus knows it. He is speaking to his disciples, trying to get them ready for what lies ahead.

But then, the noise of the approaching mob catches his attention. He looks up and sees Judas leading the mob. Judas walks to Jesus and kisses him on the cheek (the prearranged way to identify Jesus to the authorities in the dark so that Jesus can be arrested, and then Jesus responds with this piercing question that has resounded across the ages: "Friend, why are you here?"

Trust me when I tell you, that's not just a question for Judas. It's also for you and for me this morning. "Why are you here? What are you doing? What is the meaning of your life? What is your sense of direction? What is your purpose? What are you going to do with the rest of your life?"

Dr. Victor Frankl was a well-known psychiatrist who survived a Nazi concentration camp. He wrote a book about his ordeal years later. The whole book is fascinating, but one thing in particular stuck out to me. He noticed that strong looking people, robust, muscular people were actually weaker than some prisoners who look physically frail. The people who were more likely to survive were the ones who had a sense of meaning, a direction, a purpose, a vital faith. *Meaning* was more important than *muscles*.

I love this quote from Dr. Frankl: “We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through huts comforting others, helping others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man except one thing: the last piece of human freedom is to

Choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

I love that last phrase - Choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances. It is SO important to know - to decide why we are here - what our purpose is.

Sometimes, at the end of one year and the beginning of the next, we think about some of these heavy-duty questions. Have you thought about it? Do you know what you’re living for? Have you discovered the real priorities? Do you know why you are here? Do you know what you’re going to do with the rest of your life?

You actually may never have put words to those questions, but you are actually answering them every single day of your life by your actions and your attitudes, by what you believe, by what you stand for, by what you give your time and energy to, and yes, even by how you spend your money.

Some people answer those important questions by saying they’re here to endure life, to persevere, to cope, to stay alive.

I heard a cute story about a 1st grade teacher who walked into her classroom one morning and found little Johnny standing up in front of the room with his tummy stuck way out.

“Johnny,” she asked, “why are you standing there sticking out your stomach?”

“Well,” said Johnny, “I had a stomachache this morning, so I went to see the nurse, and she said if I could just stick it out till noon, maybe it would be OK!”

Unfortunately, many people go through life like that - they just stick it out till noon - with no celebration of life, with no sense of purpose. They give in to boredom and apathy, to fear and anxiety. They don’t really live - they merely exist and endure life, and that’s so sad.

There was a graffiti message written on a wall that says it all: Joe Smith - Died at 43, buried at 73.

We’re not here to just endure life. Christ came to show us that we can have full, vibrant, celebratory lives.

Another way people answer the question about purpose in life is to say, “We’re here to pursue Pleasure.”

Of course, joy is a vital part of the Christian faith. And probably many more Christians need more joy in their faith. Some get a little too heavy and somber. I believe Jesus had a wonderful sense of humor and, indeed, spent time with lots of people. But he was not in favor of the “eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die” kind of attitude.”

I think we all know that selfish pleasure brings no lasting happiness or fulfillment. The happiest people I know are those who have found meaning in life and are spending themselves in devotion to something bigger than themselves.

Lastly, I think some people mistakenly think their purpose is to accumulate wealth. Now, there’s nothing wrong in having money. Jesus never said there was. But the truth is money and possessions can weigh us down.

Someone once asked the actor Henry Bosworth, “What is the greatest thing that a person can have?” He said, “That’s easy. It’s not money, because you can’t hold on to it. It isn’t fame, because they will cheer you one minute and sneer at you the next. But if you can have peace in your heart, that’s the thing that really matters when all else is said and done.”

Yes, we need to make a living. But we also need to make a LIFE.

Jesus tells us how to do that. He said the greatest commandment (the ultimate answer) is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, and then love your neighbor as yourself.”

Do this, he said, and you will really live!

Someone once said, “Life is God’s gift to us. How we use it is our gift to God.”

Loving God and others - that’s what it’s all about.

Many years ago, there was young man who came from a very well-to-do family, who probably would not have had to work a day in his life. But he chose to work for God. He took a vow of poverty. He became a priest and founded a religious order. He became known and respected all over the world because of his love for God, and God’s world, and all of God’s creatures and animals. He was a man of justice and compassion and humility.

His name was Francis of Assisi. He wrote a prayer that highlights for us how to put first things first. The words of this magnificent prayer remind us beautifully of why we are here.

In just a moment I’m going to ask that we say this prayer together.

As we partake of the Lord’s Supper today, I’m going to be silent during the passing of the bread, with the hope that you’ll look again at this wonderful prayer and think about where you can apply some of these beautiful sentiments to your life in coming year.

Please join me in this prayer whose powerful words can give all of us meaning and fulfillment and purpose in this life:

Lord make me an instrument of your peace,

Where there is hatred let me sow love:

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith:

Where there is despair, hope;

and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

To be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

Prayer List: *Virginia, Jim, George, Betty, Beverly, Peggy, Dottie, Jack, Paul, Fred, Barbara, Doug, Larry, Kay, Michele, Marlise, Beth, Patricia, Allen, Wendy, Staci, Janelle, Cynthia, Gena and Bobbi.*