

AUGUST 31, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON August 24 - 'Purpose and Calling' - Exodus 3:1-10, Acts 8:26-38

One of the most significant realities of a life of faith is that of purpose. Sometimes this is referred to as "calling". We'll interchange the two in this message. Either one, the message is clear. Purpose and calling are central to the Christian life.

First we need to get clear on this sense of purpose. Above anything, it must be owned by the individual. In the sense of a congregation, it must be owned by the congregation.

Depending on your circles of faith and acquaintances, you will find no shortage of people willing to tell you your purpose. Family, faith leaders, employers, there are plenty that have their best idea for what YOU should do. We'll soon see that personal ownership is critical to purpose. Claiming a purpose on someone else's say so is dangerous. It is scarily open to manipulation and coercion. If we give someone enough authority, they can push us to anything and we'll follow out of trust. Not out of ownership.

When this happens, sometimes it works out. Other times it doesn't. It might be an unfulfilled life because what you feel deep down isn't what you are forced to do. In others it might be a genuine bottom falling out of something you were told you had to do.

Unfortunately, often when this happens there isn't much support or accountability. "You told me I was supposed to do this and it would work!" The response is far too often "well it was your decision. You didn't have to do it." And then the hands of the one pushing the issue are washed. You are left cleaning up the mess.

Make no mistake. This isn't ignoring wise counsel. All of us need people willing to help us sort out who we are and what we are meant to do. It's reality to be confused about our own purpose. So we rely on those who know us best to help us sort out, or in spiritual language discern, it.

In the end no matter the influence the choice has to be our own. It is between us and God, and that is the period at the end of the sentence.

So we see in our scriptures two basic senses of purpose. Specific and general.

In Moses we see a very specific purpose. He is born into a slaughter of newborns that he survives by finding his way to the pharaoh's daughter. As a Hebrew he is raised in the Egyptian Pharaoh's household. Moses realizes he is a Hebrew, and is enraged at an Egyptian slavemaster abusing a Hebrew. He kills the slavemaster.

Later he calls out two Hebrews arguing with one another. They reveal that they saw the murder and call Moses out. Moses runs for his life and spends decades away.

Eventually God, in the form of the burning bush, gives Moses a VERY specific purpose. Free the Hebrews and lead them to the promised land. When Moses objects, God answers every objection by giving a counter. Even when Moses says "I can't speak all the way" to calling out Pharaoh, God responds that his brother Aaron is more than up to the task.

Moses has a VERY specific call. It's a big one. But specific to him.

Keep something in mind. Specific doesn't mean huge. All of us have purpose specific to our own lives. Paul in Corinthians talks about the body of Christ with this in mind. If everyone were alike, there would be countless purposes unfulfilled. Moses might have had the purpose of liberating the Hebrews from slavery. We may have the purpose of introducing and leading someone to Christ. Both are equally significant.

This idea of specific is important. We are told that all of us need to be a Moses, or a Jeremiah, or an Isaiah or Daniel. We hear all the time students or athletes being told they all need to be leader. This is easily called out. If everyone is a leader, who follows?

Being a follower is just as important and noble as being a leader. If we're following, we just have to follow the right leader. Does our leader embody the love, mercy, compassion, and grace of Christ? If so, then awesome! Be a follower to that leader.

Each of us on the other hand still has a unique purpose. There are things you can do, people you can speak to, places you can reach that none other can. So Take hold of it! Embrace it! Lean into it knowing that you know that God is at your back.

On the other hand there are purposes that are much bigger and broader. Rather than being specific to a Moses they are extended to all of us.

With Phillip he was given a direction. "Go this way". As he went on his way he was led to something else, the Ethiopian. This guy was on his way home, reading a scroll from Isaiah, and not understanding it. As Phillip

came upon him he gave understanding. The Ethiopian then understood and believed.

Phillip was following the broad command to every believer. “Go and make disciples of all the nations.” This is all of us. Live out the grace, mercy, and love of Jesus. Do it in a way that others notice it and then take note. Then invite them into a relationship with God through Christ.

Each and every one of us is given this purpose. Live into the love of Jesus. Invite the world into a relationship with God that follows the example of Jesus.

No matter what our specific purpose we are tasked with this. Purposed to be a coach, an executive, a supervisor, a janitor, a cashier, none of it matters. We are purposed to exemplify Christ as a compelling witness. In everything that we do.

The specific purpose can be wonderful. The broad purpose just as much. The broad purpose is ripe with opportunity. Phillip wasn’t given a destination, just a direction. That left him open to whomever or whatever came on his path. Paying attention he was able to see this Ethiopian looking for a purpose himself. He directed him and helped him find it.

Then he left and was on to the next adventure.

Now, if we are being honest, Phillip did NOT fulfill the great commission that Jesus gave in Matthew. Jesus said to make DISCIPLES of the nations. NOT converts. Phillip made a convert. And in his situation that’s actually great!

A broad purpose means we do the best we can with what we have. This Ethiopian was on his way home. Did Phillip know any churches in Ethiopia? Probably not. He didn’t have any resources to point this man to.

Fortunately we aren’t in that same position. We have the same broad call. Exemplify Jesus. You each have your own individual purpose. That’s between you and God. Both should intersect. Whatever your individual purpose, it includes the broad purpose of exemplifying Jesus. We don’t have the disadvantage of no resource to point someone to,

Early this year we did a series where we reminded everyone of the various ministries our congregation engages. This was to equip you to embrace our common purpose. Our purpose is to invite those who don’t know God through Christ into that relationship. Our ministries all feed that purpose. Fellowship, service, study, and worship all help us live into both our specific and common purposes. They add spiritual value to our lives when we embrace them.

This is what we all have to offer those around us. In our specific purposes we live into the common purpose of exemplifying Christ. When those we meet don’t have that experience, we have something to invite them into. I can’t tell you your specific purpose. That’s between you and God. Coach? Executive? Custodian? Cashier? Parent? I don’t know. All are equally important.

I can tell you that no matter what that specific purpose is, the purpose to follow Jesus is yours. Love like Jesus. Show mercy and compassion like Jesus. Meet the needs Jesus told us to meet. All of that is common to every believer.

Each and every day we wake up and head into the world. Do we embody the specific and broad purposes of God? This is our daily call and challenge. When we leave this building today who will we encounter? Tomorrow whose paths will we cross? You may be the Moses for someone. You may be their Phillip. Lives are changed by our individual and collective intention and willingness to live into God’s purposes for our lives.

Tough Question: I haven’t had that extreme “born again experience”, how do I know I’m saved?

This is a great question. It’s born out of a lack of consideration that scripture was written before there were any Christians, any Christian church, and therefore anyone actually born into the faith itself.

John 3 where Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be “born again of water and the spirit” and 2 Corinthians where we are told that everyone who comes to Christ is a “new creation”. Certainly both of these mean there must be some extreme conversion experience from the heathen to the faithful if we are actually saved.

I myself, even though I was born into Christianity and never knew anything else was confronted with this at about 16 years old while stocking milk with another middle aged employee at the grocery store we worked at. He asked when I was saved and I didn’t have an answer. He began talking about my “spiritual birthday” and that to not know that moment where I “turned my life around” meant I probably hadn’t been saved at all. At 16 I was confused.

Fortunately I’ve had many years, a lot of study, great mentors, and ministry to help me sort past this. Before continuing please indulge me in reading some passages from 1 John. I’ve highlighted parts for you to keep particularly in mind.

1 John 2

26 I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. 27 As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him.

God's Children and Sin

28 And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.

29 If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.

1 John 3

7 Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. 8 The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. 9 No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God. 10 This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.

1 John 4

4 You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. 5 They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. 6 We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit[a] of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

God's Love and Ours

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

The problem with demanding some major conversion experience is that not everyone has one yet those same people are Christian. How can this be?

Back in the time when the New Testament was being written, there weren't any Christians. There's couldn't have been. What this means is that only those capable of understanding the message and then consciously deciding to be Christian became part of the church. This would have exclusively been older people, likely adults. So naturally everyone who became Christian had that kind of experience to some extent. Then the hope was that they would pass that along to friends in family. In households where the man in charge dictated the faith of the house, that family became Christian by default if nothing else.

As time progressed something happened. The church formed. Christian adults had Christian babies and raised them in the faith. The intended result was, and is, that these children would never know a time outside the knowledge and grace of Christ. This is a wonderful reality! That's why we have things like confirmation. It isn't to convert the kids. It is to give them an experience that summarizes and solidifies what Christians believe and letting them own it for themselves when they are beyond childhood and prepared to comprehend the message for themselves.

If they were raised in the faith, however, the likelihood this would result in some major turn from wicked ways to good is slim. They should have been raised into those attitudes and actions their whole lives by intentional Christian parents who have regularly exposed them to life in a church of also faithful and established saints. This makes you no less Christian.

There are certainly many who experience that change of heart later in life. They may have been raised into a morality that is far from that of Christ. In those instances they likely have that extreme converting experience. It is beautiful and to be celebrated.

No less worthy and valuable is the steady, consistent growth and maturing of someone who has known faith in Christ since birth.

In either case, there is a task that remains the consistent among all. We are to stay tuned into God, look at the example of Christ, and continually strive to be more Christlike. No matter how long we've been at this all of us have issues that keep us from living perfectly. Day by day we seek God, we reflect on ourselves, we change what

needs changed. Then something else rears its head and we work with the help of God to conquer that next. And so on for our lives.

How do we know as we believe in Christ if we are saved? Look at the highlighted passages from 1 John. Do we love? Do we do our best to do what is right? In the non-highlighted passages do we confess we have sin? Do we strive to change the sin in our lives? Some have been doing this their whole lives and the changes have been present but small. It's still change.

Each time we become more like Jesus we are "born again". As such born again isn't one and done. It's over and over again, and each and every Christian whether lifelong or converting later has this experience.

You don't think you were born again? If you follow Christ, even through your entire life, you have been. You've been born again over and over. You've been a renewed creation many times. And congratulations! You will continue to be born again and recreated through the rest of your time in this world.

Embrace it. Accept it. Own it. Be thankful that the journey is just that, a journey. The change, discovery, and movement towards God is a gift and an exciting reality.

Salvation doesn't depend on some man-made definition of "born again". It's about a relationship and commitment to God through Christ. And it looks a lot of different ways because we have all led wildly different life experiences.