

The Meaning of Life
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Bedford Presbyterian Church
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INTRO TO SCRIPTURE – I don't know how many of you have read all the way through the Book of Acts, but basically, it's one long story about the conversion of Paul from a persecutor of Christians into Paul the Apostle of Christ. The book tells of his travels around the Greco-Roman world and ends with his arrival in Rome. Toward the end of the book there's a long story about a terrible storm at sea and subsequent shipwreck that Paul and everyone else on board survive. What I'm about to read picks up just after their miraculous safe arrival on an island.

Scripture: Acts 28:1-6

After we had reached safety, we then learned that the island was called Malta. The natives showed us unusual kindness. Since it had begun to rain and was cold, they kindled a fire and welcomed all of us round it. Paul had gathered a bundle of brushwood and was putting it on the fire, when a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, 'This man must be a murderer; though he has escaped from the sea, justice is not allowing him to live.' Paul, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were expecting him to swell up or drop dead, but after they had waited a long time and saw that nothing unusual had happened to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.

So this is a story about the human tendency to assign meaning to things, isn't it? Paul is bitten by a viper and the people conclude that it's because he's a murderer and deserves to die. But then he doesn't die and so they look for meaning in the opposite direction and decide he's a god. And in fact, both directions are wrong. He's neither a murderer nor a god. Sometimes, as Sigmund Freud said, a cigar is just a cigar. In this case, it looks like a viper is just a viper. The meaning of Paul the Apostle's life is way beyond these people's understanding, and in fact is still unfolding to this day.

I'm puzzling about the meaning of events in one's life because of a series of events in my life that seem fraught with significance – but what do they mean? I'm going to tell you the story and see what you make of it.

Part I – A couple of weeks before Christmas, Joe and I took the train into the city on a Monday to do some Christmas shopping at the crafts booths in Grand Central Station. Joe knew that I had been wanting a silver ring for my index finger and so he bought one for me that day. It was very sweet.

Two days later, he and I flew down to Washington DC for the day to attend a retirement party for his brother. At the end of the day as we were getting on the airplane to return home, I discovered, to my dismay, that my ring was gone. It had slipped off my finger. We called everybody we had seen in Washington and asked them to look for it, but no one found it. I was sad.

Part II – On the Sunday after Christmas, Joe and my son Django and I went for an afternoon walk at the Rockefeller Preserve on the Hudson River. At the end of the walk, I discovered, to my dismay, that my favorite necklace, which I had been wearing, was no longer around my neck. I was particularly attached to this necklace because we bought it when we were in Morocco last year. Like the ring, it wasn't worth a lot of money, but it had special significance for me. We looked in the car and then retraced our steps, but no luck. We didn't find it. Joe and I returned the next day and redid our four-mile walk, to no avail. I put up a notice on a notice board at the entrance to the park, in the faint hope that some honest person would see it and return my necklace.

Part III – The next Sunday after that, I came here as usual and wore, as I did every Sunday, the beautiful gold cross that was given to me by this congregation on the occasion of my ordination. It was designed to look like the cross that is hanging here in the sanctuary and I treasured it greatly. When I was getting ready to go home after the service, I noticed that I wasn't wearing the cross and I didn't remember putting it away. But sometimes I do things and forget them, so I went upstairs and looked in the black velvet box where I keep the cross and it wasn't there. I looked everywhere I had been in the church that morning, but didn't find it. It was so mysterious because this cross was on a black cord. There was no hook or clasp to come undone. It was completely baffling, especially given the fact that it was the third piece of treasured jewelry I had lost in as many weeks.

I went home and told this story to Django, who of course had been in on the missing necklace and had heard about the ring. "The thing that interests me," he said, "is that you're not more upset about losing this stuff." Which caused me to say, "Well, I think it's because these are just *things*. They're things I loved, but

ultimately they're just things." Then I said, "What really upsets me; the thing that really drives me over the edge is when my computer crashes."

So that's the first half of the story. Here's the second half. . . Part I – Later that same night that I lost the gold cross, I took off the grey cardigan I had been wearing all day over a black turtleneck. Joe said to me, "Wait a minute, turn around." Then he said, "There's your cross." It was hanging down my back. It had gotten turned around. It wasn't visible from the front because it was on a black cord against a black sweater. It was there the whole time and I didn't realize it. The princess and the pea I'm not, evidently. I was very happy to see it again.

Part II – Three weeks later I got home from work late after a meeting one night. Joe said, "A person named Marina called to say she thinks she has your Moroccan necklace." The next day I went to Marina's house and she returned my necklace. She had found it on the path the day I lost it and had picked it up. She had returned to the park three weeks later and seen my notice and called me. She was an honest person.

Part III – Two weeks after that I was here at church and I had an appointment in Katonah. I was running late. I got out to my car and realized that I had left my keys on my desk. I thought I had an extra car key in my purse and I was searching around the bottom of my purse for the key and guess what I found? You guessed it. The ring.

Three valued objects lost, three valued objects found. Equanimity maintained throughout. What does it mean?

But wait, here's Part IV. One week after I found the ring, guess what happened? My computer crashed, of course. And it couldn't have come at a worse time, because it was the week before Palm Sunday, when I was putting together the Powerpoint presentation of the life of Jesus as portrayed through the work of great artists. I had remained calm about the loss of the jewelry but I had said out loud that the one thing that makes me crazy is the loss of my computer. End of story.

Do you believe in the School of Life? That somehow the things that happen to you, the problems, the pleasures, the kinds of people in your life are there to teach you something? And that when you don't learn the lesson the first time, you get a similar situation or the same kind of person over and over again until

you learn what you need to learn? I believe this. I believe that we are set upon this earth to learn and grow spiritually and that in some mysterious way the universe conspires to foster this growth, especially if we seek it. I believe that the significant things that happen to us happen for a reason and that the significant people in our lives are there for a reason. And that includes the circumstances which bring suffering and the people who make us miserable. All of these things serve the greater purpose of moving us through learning toward enlightenment, if we allow it.

I cannot offer a rational explanation for this belief. All I can say is that it has been my experience and what I've learned from my religious studies and from my teachers. It has to do with belief in a benign, creative force in the universe, an ineffable reality that in a most mysterious way co-creates with us what we need to have in order to grow. One way of speaking about this ineffable presence is to use the word "God." I believe that if any of us do our best to orient our lives toward this creative force called God, we can experience transformation and lead meaningful, compassionate lives. I believe that's what Jesus came to teach us.

In her latest book, *The Case for God*, Karen Armstrong says this about God-oriented people: ". . . religious people are ambitious. They want lives overflowing with significance. Instead of being crushed and embittered by the sorrow of life, they seek to retain their peace and serenity in the midst of their pain. They yearn for the courage to overcome their terror of mortality; instead of being grasping and mean-spirited, they aspire to live generously, large-heartedly and justly, and to inhabit every single part of their humanity."¹

What do these lofty ambitions have to do with my small story about lost and found jewelry and a crashing computer? It's this. One of my favorite Buddhist teachers, Pema Chödrön, teaches that we need to practice equanimity in the small stuff in our lives, so that when we're hit with the catastrophic events, we're practiced in staying grounded, calm and open to whatever life presents us. So that instead of being crushed and embittered by the sorrow of life, as Karen Armstrong said, we can seek to retain peace and serenity, even unto death. Now I realize that there are many people in this room who are already dealing with or who have dealt with much more serious issues than the little ones I'm talking about. And so have I. But the point is, the small stuff gives you a chance to practice.

¹ Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God*, p. 329

The School of Life delivers material for you to work with every day in this way – the person who cuts you off in traffic, the rude grocery store clerk, the terrible haircut, the bad cold, the crashing computer. Believe it or not, these petty annoyances are tiny opportunities to practice living a God-oriented life. Opportunities to recognize reality, and accept what comes to you. To bless those clerks who persecute you, to realize that your hair is not terrifically important in the grand scheme of things, to receive a bad cold as a gift from your body that gives you permission to slow down a little, to see the crashing computer as a chance to practice your equanimity. To look for the lesson in the little things life sends our way. We need to practice with the small stuff in order to learn to truly live generously, large-heartedly and justly, and the School of Life, with God as principal, is there to help.

Post Script before benediction: OK, I can't end this sermon here. Would you like to know how I responded when my computer crashed? I took it in stride! I got the help I needed and moved ahead and got my work done. A week later, my computer was fixed.

I started thinking something like, wow, I'm getting this equanimity thing down! I must be on my way to wisdom! How cool am I?

But of course the School of Life doesn't support that kind of egotism. This last Tuesday, as I was working on this sermon, I noticed something missing from my desk and I *flipped out*. I went charging down to the office and was ranting about people taking things from my desk and blah blah blah. There was no equanimity in sight! AND it turned out I was *wrong* about the missing object, which wasn't missing at all. The School of Life strikes again. I still have much to learn about equanimity. Don't we all? Let's keep practicing.