

If someone asked you, what is your purpose in life, would you have a ready answer? I think many people would answer with their role in their family, or their profession; some very pious people might even answer with their role in the church. Others might brush the question aside with a quip, like the caption on the famous poster of a sinking ship that says, "It could be that the purpose of your life is only to serve as a warning to others." But a glib remark can conceal deep pain that comes from not having a sense of purpose at all.

I wasn't particularly interested in Prince Harry's memoir *Spare*. At first my attitude was that the only rich, privileged person whose complaints about the misfortunes of their upbringing interest me is Bruce Wayne, and he's not a real person. But the mainstream media had other ideas, and while I still have no desire to buy or read Harry's book, I did see enough about it in the news to gather that his lack of a purpose independent of the need to assure succession to the throne has felt demeaning and traumatic. He apparently spends much of the book denouncing different people for using him as an instrument for their own ends without caring about him as an individual. Does the fact that I'm only interested in Harry because I can use his story as a sermon illustration make me as bad as they are? Probably.

Our faith teaches that everyone has innate value, being made in the image of God, and therefore worthy of respect, but people also feel a need to contribute to the world—in some way. Others can provide guidance and support, and God certainly blesses us with diverse and abundant gifts, but we also need to take on responsibility for discerning and following God's call to our purpose, and no one can do that for us. Harry seems to be struggling mightily to define his own purpose, and I respect that. But as unusual as his story might be, his experience is more broadly applicable.

For example, the man born blind is treated as something of a football in today's Gospel. Many of the characters are only interested in him as an object. We never learn his name. The disciples and the pharisees assume that he's a consequence of sin, and the pharisees try to use him to discredit Jesus. And Jesus himself says, "...he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Wait, Jesus too?

Well, in all fairness, the Gospels are biographies of Jesus, so to an extent the purpose of every other character is to help the reader learn about Jesus. But Jesus's statement about why the man was born blind is better understood as setting up the point of the story than as characterizing the man's purpose or identity. The story itself goes into an unusual level of detail to show the man's agency, personality, gifts, and newfound sense of purpose. And while Harry's story is an example of a problem many people struggle with, the healed man exemplifies the solution.

I think the solution to the problem of purpose this story offers has two aspects. First, even people who struggle to identify their purpose can usually identify their gifts. The man Jesus heals begins by showing the gift of faith by washing in the pool of Siloam. That particular pool is significant in part because the name of the pool means

“sent,” which draws attention to the theme of purpose and raises the question of who is doing the sending. The answer is God, by the way. The pool is also significant because in Jesus’s day, Jews used this pool for cleansing rituals associated with Temple worship, making this part of the story a powerful symbol of baptism, showing the link between cleansing, purification, and purpose that we celebrate in that sacrament.

Baptism symbolizes and connects us with God’s unconditional love for every person. Baptism also accomplishes our full initiation and membership into Christ’s body, the Church. [In a moment, Skyler will receive this sacrament, and Christ will be present in him forever after, bestowing Christ’s promised unconditional love, never-ending forgiveness, and life everlasting.] Ironically, God uses water to create a bond that can never be dissolved. Nothing and no one will ever be able to take God’s love away from the baptized, nor separate us from the grace and power of Jesus Christ, and our understanding of that should have consequences for our character and choices.

Accordingly, the man Jesus healed goes on from his washing and receiving the miraculous gift of sight to show further gifts, candor, courage and persistence, gifts which often come from faith, and even, in his dialogue with the Pharisees, the gift of a delightful sassiness. Finally, he shows increasing comprehension, as he goes from acknowledging Jesus as righteous, to calling him a prophet, and ultimately, addressing and worshipping him as Lord. As a result of his faithful response to his encounter with Jesus, the man finds his purpose as a follower of Jesus.

Which brings me to the second aspect of the solution to the problem of purpose: perspective. There is nothing wrong and much right with finding our sense of purpose in our earthly life, finding meaning and pride in that sense, and using it to guide our lives. But the Pharisees had a strong sense of purpose too. That was not their problem, but rather, they had lost sight, so to speak, of what was most important. Again, the answer is God. Human understanding is wonderful, but never sufficient to know God, because God is so much greater than we could understand. God has to reveal things to us, especially things about God, because we could never figure them out for ourselves.

The man Jesus healed understands his role in revealing a divine truth, embraces that role, and even has fun with it, even though he gets driven out for his trouble. Telling people what they don’t want to hear is an easy way to get into trouble, but it’s better than lying. He joyfully subordinates himself to God’s will while the Pharisees tie themselves up in knots trying to replace God’s revelation with their understanding of how God and the world “should” be. The pharisees are so busy trying to get the answer they want that they overlook the hypocrisy of conducting an investigation on the sabbath, which is certainly more work than making a bit of spit-mud. But of course, the original “offense” falls by the wayside as the Pharisees obsess over finding any fault that will discredit Jesus and preserve the worldview that gave them power and comfort.

In contrast, even though he has just found his purpose, the healed man is ultimately more interested in being in relationship with Jesus. And this makes perfect

sense, because while God blesses us with diverse and abundant gifts and wants us to use them according to God's will for us, God does this for the benefit of us and the world, not for God's benefit, and not because God's love is conditional on how good we are, or anything else. God's love is sufficient for us and God wants us to know and live in God's truth, but God will not force them on us. We must accept God's love and God's truth as the healed man did and the Pharisees did not.

Therefore, being in right relationship with God is far more important than our sense of earthly purpose or how fully we realize it. Our destiny is not any earthly accolade we merit, but the perfect joy of being united with God in heaven, where our only purpose will be to praise and glorify God. Therefore the verse St. Paul quotes does not say, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and resume your work on what had seemed important before," but rather, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

What wonderful works were shown in the healed man! And because by our baptism we too are in relationship with God, we can likewise reveal the grace, love, and truth of God in our own day. So if our purpose is to accept God's great love for us, and respond in ways that glorify God, the more important question than "What is your purpose in life?" is, "How can I glorify God in this place and time?"