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David Holroyd Retires: Again

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him. Matthew 21:23-32

Normally when we hear stories from the Gospels, Jesus is the one not wanting to get boxed in by questions asked from the crowds listening in. In today's reading from Matthew, he turns the tables and says: "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things." This time he is the one asking.

One question.

Which of course got me thinking.

What if we were given one question to ask of God, what would it be?

A group of Christians were asked what they would be come up with. These are ones that came up the most.

"How can I know for sure how to get to heaven?"

Maybe this is a two-parter: "Am I going to heaven?"

"Is there heaven?"

"Why is there so much suffering in the world?"

"Why did my sister have to die so young?"

"Why did my father walk out and leave us with nothing?"

"What really happens when you die?"

“What will make us happy?”
 Finally: “Why am I here?”

Certainly not a complete or surprising list. Notice that many of the top questions are quite personal and self-focused: concerns about “my” path to heaven and anything bad that might come “my way.” Others are broadly philosophical and less transactional and center on what we might call the meaning of life itself.

Looking at our second reading this morning, Paul’s letter to the Philippians that he wrote from prison. In these many questions people have for God, they may be our way of doing what Paul called: working out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you.”

I challenged myself not to make today’s sermon too much about our good friend David Holroyd’s retirement celebration. I know he would disapprove if this were an extended toast instead of a homily that lifts up the Good News. And yet I wanted to find a way to work him in somehow.

A week ago, I heard the following from a life-coach: that there is no word from Japanese for our English word ‘retirement.’ The Japanese use another word for this third act of life. *Ikigai*, which means ‘that which makes life worth living’ – or a sense of purpose to life. It’s a forward-looking word. A life affirming word.

I thought perfect! That would be my transition to tie in a story or two about David, who has made much of his lighthearted claim that he has “flunked retirement.”

David had already put in 30 years as full-time rector some years ago, started his pension and with Snookie, he was very much living into his third act. He would be the first person to say that the greatest gift during this time was he still held onto a sense of purpose.

Going back to *Ikigai* -- wanting to make sure the veracity of the quote -- I sent it to my Japanese friend who just so happened to be in Japan visiting her mother. This is what she sent back to me.

“In fact: there IS a word for retirement in Japanese that is *Teinen Taishoku*.

About the word *Ikigai*. Many people talk about *Ikigai* in their retirement obviously. But *Ikigai* is not just for retirement. In fact, parents encourage children to find *Ikigai* in life in young age as they choose their life directions, including school and college choices. Also because of that, we know that one’s *Ikigai* changes as we get older and change.

Young and old and all of us in between: what is our purpose? What have we been given life for?”

The apostle Paul landed in prison more than a few times. He used that time to pray, reflect and continued writing to the various churches he founded. Like any prisoner, he had many

hours to think about life and death: to consider the choices he made before and after his conversion to faith on that famous road to Damascus. Time behind bars can humble even the toughest and bravest: they lose their freedom, control and many can lose hope.

Yet Paul would never be humiliated by his captors because he was rooted in what he believed in: the death and Resurrection of Christ was real and everything to him. It is telling and maybe even surprising what he told his followers to do. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. He then pointed to Christ as one who became human, emptied himself and came to serve.

To me, he was guiding the faithful to a sense of purpose.

There is a gift of Christian community – in being the church today -- that seems to have to be defended, communicated, and justified. Why are we here? Why does it matter -- gathering more together when we could be left alone. You go your way: I'll go my way. We are a culture crying out about the epidemic of loneliness, and here we are. We gather in our sorrows and our joys. On the great feasts of the church when other people sit in your pew, to those quiet warm Sundays over the summer months when there is ample room for many more.

What I often say to others who come our way, is that a gift of Christian community is that at our best we walk with the faithful from cradle to grave – literally. Baptisms, Sunday School, confirmation, a wedding thrown in there from time to time. Crises. Celebrations. Aging. Hospital stays. Physical rehab. Clergy come and go and yet the core of any community remains with the faithful who have claimed this place as sacred space.

At our best, we challenge each other to use our gifts to the glory of God and to help make this world a more Christ-like world.

David and I have worked together for over ten years now. He was our "senior curate," we dubbed him. He is a fellow pilgrim with all of us. Not afraid to share his challenges and wounds that can take a long time to heal. We know where he found joy: with family, being around people and his well-known love of sports and music.

When we are fortunate to get a third act in life, it is a good thing to know that we can match our purpose – that which makes life worth living -- with our faith.

Richard Rohr, author of Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life wrote especially to many people here who are thinking a lot about that second half. When your memory is not as sharp, when walking is not as steady, and we have more time than we wish to look back over choices made.

Rohr wrote this:

“Your concern is not so much to have what you love anymore, but to love what you have—right now. This is a monumental change from the first half of life, so much so that it is almost the litmus test of whether you are in the second half of life at all.”

We don't always get to have what or whom we love anymore. Life, loss, grief, worry, anxiety, and fear have a way of piling up.

But what a gift: to be able to love what you have, right now.

I think David has more than good job of helping us all – young and not so young – to start looking for what makes life worth living.

From Richard Rohr: “A person must pass the lessons learned on to others—or there has been no real gift at all.” And that David has.

David has shown us that purpose starts with people. Following the way of Christ, humble service never gets old or wears out. Emptying oneself is often the quickest path to finding a full life.

David has shown us that community matters. And there is great joy in a game well played – and when we can always hope for next year.

We live and we change. And what gives our life meaning can also change.

So, David has not flunk retirement. He showed us something more.