

## “The Purposes of God”

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(John 15:9-17)

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

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### Do the Purposes of the Church Align with the Purpose of God?

(Note: This is the fourth sermon in a series that has concentrated on *Tokens of Trust* by Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams.

Sometime in the tenth century the envoys of the Grand Duke of Kiev visited various countries to examine the local religion; and when they arrived in Constantinople and attended the service in the great cathedral of Holy Wisdom there, they said: “We did not know whether we were in heaven or on earth.” And this is how Christianity came to Russia. That may seem a bit far-fetched to us, but heaven is what is laid open when the Church is truly the Church and is aligned with the purpose of God: Thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

The Bible insists that GOD HAS AN ETERNAL PURPOSE, and the church the leading lady. To paraphrase **E. B. White**, “No matter where you sit in [First Baptist Church Dayton], you feel the vibrations of great times and tall deeds.” “And if that doesn’t make us approach the world with reverence and amazement, I don’t know what will.” The work of the church is the most important work in the world. I am as thrilled by the privilege of playing a part in the purpose of God as an ordinary person is to have a bit part in a movie. I want you to have that excitement: “That’s me the 2,000<sup>th</sup> soldier on the far left carrying a rifle.” The scene lasts three seconds and family and friends have gathered with Redenbacher popcorn to celebrate the bit part. It is that excitement I want for us as we play our part in the purpose of God.

And until the trumpet sounds and time stands still and God is revealed in glory, God’s purpose shines through in hints: The Easter Sunday baptism of young people, thirty-five members of this church rehabbing the home of a senior citizen on Rebuilding Together Dayton Saturday, members working together for justice, passing out sack lunches to the hungry, a rabbi, a priest, and a preacher leading conversation from the book of Amos, a handful of Christians meeting for prayer and the study of Scripture. What we do is part of what God is doing in this world. It gets multiplied by the actions of all the Christians who have ever lived.

**Lest we forget**, the church has always believed that God has an eternal purpose. What are the purposes of God? “Peace and praise, reconciliation and delight; these are the purposes of God.” The ongoing work of creation, unity, love, and the defeat of death; these are the purposes of God. Paul spells it out: God has “a plan for the fullness of time, to gather all things in [Jesus], things in heaven and things on earth.” And this universal unity is to be orchestrated by the church. So brace yourself: **GOD AT WORK**.

And God’s purpose is wrapped in God’s love. No wonder Jesus says, “Love one another.” Love is a totally different kind of knowing. As **Wittgenstein** said, “It is love that believes the resurrection.” And this love and belief produce a new world where generosity replaces greed and life overcomes death. An “economy of gift” becomes our way of life in a world of unlimited generosity: To give one’s life.

But we struggle with this kind of loving generosity. Remember the description of the not-a-penny-to-his-name prodigal son. A son used to the generosity of his father's house now learns the stark reality of an ungenerous community. In the words of the KJV, "**no man gave unto him.**" And this has been the way of the world as far back as human memory goes. It is something of what the church was trying to say in the idea of "original sin." We are all caught up in a tangle of wrong turns that pile up generation after generation. And once we made this wrong turn, it was not possible with one simple right turn to get back home. We once lived in the largest subdivision in the country. And one wrong turn and I would get lost in my own subdivision. This is an analogy of how we can get lost from the purposes of God. No wonder it is hard to train people in the habits of generosity. "In humanity's history, we learn what we want by watching someone else wanting it and competing with them for it."

**Rowan Williams** says, "Something needs to reverse the flow, to break the cycle. Fearlessness in giving has to find its place at the heart of things." And this is one of the reasons that a life like that of Jesus was necessary. Only a human gift of selfless giving could heal the tangled mess of human history. And Jesus, with no trace of self-interest or self-defense, reverses the flow of human self-absorption. Jesus as a human being offered his life as an unrestricted gift to the Father and to the world as unrestricted love.

Sure, a man who would give up his life for his friends seems to go against the grain of the world. Yet the Bible seems intent on teaching us that such an action is normal in the kingdom of God. **John Yoder** says such people go with the grain of the universe. "For us and for our salvation," the **Nicene Creed** puts it nicely. "You left nothing undone until you had brought us to heaven," says a simple phrase from the **Eastern Orthodox** liturgy. "For our sake" tells us how we are to read the whole story of Jesus. "For the sake of others" tells us how we are to live the rest of our lives.

But this love and generosity doesn't end at the cross. Christians celebrate Easter. I hope that our celebration of the Easter season has helped you understand that Easter is not a one-day event in the life of the Church and then it is "See you Christmas." Easter is the ultimate demonstration of the purpose of God. As **N. T. Wright** says, "Easter was the pilot project." What God did for Jesus that explosive morning is what God intends to do for the whole creation.

Easter, God's new creation, reverses the tragedy that we made of God's original creation. "When we celebrate Easter, we are really standing in the middle of a second 'Big Bang', a tumultuous surge of divine energy as fiery and intense as the very beginning of the universe. What a recent writer wonderfully calls 'the fire in the equations,' the energy in the mathematical and physical structures of things, is here at Easter."

**Now, does it dawn on us that the overcoming of death is the purpose of God?** After all, death is what seems to do us in. The grave seems so final. Yet the gospel insists, as David Bentley Hart says, that death doesn't get the final word because of its intrinsic falsity, its unjust dominion over the world, its ultimate nullity; the knowledge that God is not pleased or nourished by our deaths, God is the conqueror of hell, that he has condemned all these things by the power of the cross; the knowledge that God is life and light and infinite love, and that the path that leads through nature and history to his kingdom is opened to us by way of the natural and historical absurdity – a resurrection of a dead man from the grave. So we dare to believe and trumpet our amazing gospel: "Death shall be no more. Mourning and crying and pain shall be no more."

**In destroying death, Jesus also invaded and destroyed hell.** *How's that thought for a Sunday morning pick-me-up and wake-me-up?* Jesus went to hell and back for us. After all, hell is the furthest point of distance from Jesus that the NT writers could imagine. The Apostles' Creed says of Jesus that "He descended into hell". Ephesians 4:10 says that Jesus went to underground prisons where the spirits of those who had died resided. I Pt 3.18-19 says that Jesus went and preached to the spirits in prison. This may mean that Jesus went to hell and people had the chance to accept the good news and to be transformed by it. Eastern Christians depict the resurrection as Jesus breaking down the doors of a prison in which Adam and Eve, and other Old Testament characters are bound. Through the actions of fearless giving and love, there is a way to peace and praise from any imaginable place, even the prison in which the dead live. Imagine then our love and generosity as eliminating what causes hell in human lives – not just private generosity but public as well.

The ancient Easter liturgy begins on Holy Saturday with the church gathered outside around a large fire. The priest lights the Christ candle. Then each Christian lights a candle from the Christ candle and the processional into the darkened church becomes the first light of Easter and the church celebrates resurrection and new life. If First Baptist is to be part of the new creation, we must be the ongoing celebration of the Easter liturgy in the world: "the fire in the equation" that reveals the purpose of God! Amen!