

How Not to Waste Your Life

A Sermon Preached by
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In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Mark 1:9-11

Millions, maybe even billions, of people are wasting their one and only lives, and they don't even know it. There are lots of ways to waste your life, and I've tried several of them, but today I want to warn you about three of them, three that we can fall prey to if we don't remember what our baptism means.

We can waste our lives trying to be somebody else. Nobody's going to admit to doing that very thing right now, but that doesn't mean that a lot of us aren't doing it, one way or another. When we let other people determine who we are, we're wasting our lives. Some of us let other people make the important calls for us throughout our lives. When we're small children it's important for us to defer to our parents; they *do* know better. But what often happens is when we become teens young people reject their parent's authority only to submit to peer authority.

Have you noticed how young people – in their desperation to stand out – end up looking exactly like each other, down to the stud in the eyebrow or the Asian calligraphy tattoo? Most teens dress like their peers. They talk like their peers. They act like their peers. It's like they are defaulting to the crowd—or more likely—whomever they think is the coolest person in the crowd. We're wasting our lives when we think, "if I were just more like _____ (fill in the name here) then I'd be happy, accepted, and loved." That's just letting someone else tell us who we are.

God didn't go the cross for you so that you could trade your own unique identity for that of somebody else. Jesus says, "What good is it for you to gain the whole world and lose *your* life in the process"?

We're wasting our lives, too, when we compete with people around us: friends, enemies, "frenemies," siblings, parents, and even our own kids. Most of us aren't going to openly admit to this sin, either, but we do it. Churches used to talk a lot about envy and jealousy; we don't so much anymore. But those sins are just as deadly as they have always been. They keep us chasing after the wrong things, things that pass away. Envy and jealousy are great motivators; they get us to do things that are completely out of character for us. When we look at other people and want what they have – their car, their job, their house, their wife, their kids, their body, *their* lives – we're wasting *our* lives, because we can never have those things. They aren't meant for us. Grown-ups, even *senior* grown-ups, can still be angry that they weren't Mom's favorite child. They can still be wondering if they were as successful as their classmates from the class of '82 or '52 or 2002. When we compete with others we're letting them set the bar for us and that's way too low. Besides, we sacrifice ourselves in the process. It's a great way to waste your life.

A rabbi once had a heart to heart with one of his students. The rabbi saw how hard this student was struggling to keep up with his classmates, and sometimes even the ancient rabbinical sages. Despite his best efforts to be like them, he was failing, miserably, and making everyone miserable in the process, "Relax Shimon," explained the rabbi, "God will not ask you why you were not more like Moshe or Ariel or Gamliel. At this rate God *will* ask you why you were not more like Shimon." Baptism tells us that God wants you to be you – with *your* unique gifts and callings, otherwise he would not have made you or called your name at the time of your baptism.

If you've been baptized you can know with 100% certainty that God has blessed who *you* are, even before you've done one good thing to earn that love. In Baptism God says, "I love you, – not because you're smarter than a fifth grader or more successful than Bill Gates or because you comb your hair just like Justin Bieber. I love you because I bought you with a price and you belong to me; you're mine." That's true whether you're baptism was last year or 80 years ago. We can waste our entire lives trying to be *more* – more funny, more wise, more manly, more womanly, more who we think our parents wanted us to be, but in the end it's a waste of time.

All we can be is *us*. *That's* who God wants us to be. One of the gifts of baptism is that we can be ourselves; don't waste your life trying to be anyone else.

If the first gift of Baptism is that it reminds us that we are God's chosen and beloved ones, loved just the way we are, the second gift of baptism is that it tells us that God isn't done with us yet. God wants to transform us – not into the person in the pew next to you or the head of the company, but into a special version of *Jesus*, one with your hands and feet and eyes and ears, heart and soul. Hear this excerpt from John's first letter.

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him...

1 John 3:2 NRSV

If we're going to be like *anyone* else in this life, says God, be like Christ. And get this: becoming like him isn't *our* job. The transformation work is up to the Holy Spirit working in and through our circumstances. This process begins in our Baptism and won't be complete until at last we see Jesus face to face in heaven. We don't have to make it happen, but we do have to be open to it.

Baptism reminds us that we're wasting our lives when we're desperately trying to be *ourselves*. Isn't that what everyone is telling us to do these days, "be yourself"? A friend of mine even had a license plate that spelled out, "Be Yourself [BYRSLF]." (She chose that one because YBNRML was already taken.) And this simple phrase seems like good advice. But lately we've elevated "be yourself" from some good advice on the way into a job interview to a life mantra. It's even been upgraded by TV preachers and a certain beloved talk show host to "be your *best* self."

I don't know about you, but I think being my *best* self is a colossal waste of time. I don't want to magnify who I am – warts and all – I want to be changed. If all we can be is our "best" self – on our own power – that would leave me, at best, simply a better sinner, a sinner on steroids. Isn't it pretty meaningless to say that a dirty sheet is the "best" dirty sheet ever? At the end of the day, it's still a dirty sheet. What it needs is not a pep-talk, but a washing machine. Baptism tells us that because God loves us, he won't leave us the way we are. For God to ignore the stains in our lives and

pretend we are pure and clean would be a waste of our lives. God wants to make us *new* people, not merely *better* people.

This is heresy in the world of Oprah. Now I think Oprah is very interesting and talented, and she's probably a well-intentioned person, but I think she's dead wrong when she says in the "Gospel According to Oprah" that the secret of life is being "your best self." The problem is that in her world the way to becoming our "best" selves is by being more like...well, *her*. As one observer put it: "the idea is that by adopting the best personal habits and studying the life and spiritual practices of Oprah and Oprah-approved role models," you will become who you are really meant to be, that is, *your best self*. [*Time*, January 10, 2011] That's about as far from the true Gospel as can be.

The Bible teaches us that we become "our best selves" not by copying other people, not by accepting our own faults and calling them good, not by pursuing self-fulfillment. We become our best selves by being re-born in the waters of Baptism, by following Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, and by giving ourselves away for God's sake. God does not want us to be poor imitations of Oprah or anyone else. In Baptism God calls us to follow Jesus all the way into the next life.

We can waste our lives trying to be someone else. We can waste our lives trying to be our "best" selves apart from God. And, finally, we can waste our lives waiting for our calling. There are plenty of good people who are living their lives tentatively and superficially because they have yet to "find their calling." These are the folks who tell me, "Jeff, I just don't know if God wants me to go to seminary or keep my job and continue to support my family and my aging mother." I think the answer to that is pretty simple, "Your family voted and your God-given 'calling' is right where you are." Pastors often speak in terms of 'callings' as if they are always these dramatic calls to leave one type of life and begin another, but most calls from God are not to leave where we are, but to become more immersed and more intentional right where we are.

Once we are baptized we always know what our calling is: service to God and God's people right where we are. You may also get a special calling to go to Honduras or Lithuania or to serve as a Pastor, Elder, Deacon, or Trustee, but these are not *higher* callings; they are just a few more ways

we can all live out the call we got at Baptism: to serve God and God's people wherever we find ourselves.

Mature Christians don't waste time wondering, "What is my calling, my mission, and my purpose in life?" We got all that in Baptism. How each of us lives that calling out, now that's a different question, but we're not going to wait around for lightening to strike or a horn to sound. Fiddling around with this question all our lives is like standing around after an earthquake has struck and asking, "Hmm, where shall I begin? What will be most personally fulfilling?" Christians just pick up a shovel and get working. If we do that, no matter what happens, our life will not have been wasted.

Don't waste your life. Remember what we were taught in Baptism, God loves you for who you are; he loves you enough to make you more and more like Christ; your calling and mine is simple: serve God and God's people, right where you are. Amen.

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