

The Life

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John 1:4

Sermon Series:
Gifts from the Heart
of God

***“He who has a
‘Why’ to live
for can bear
almost any
‘how.’”***

- Victor Frankl

Actor Alan Alda is perhaps best known for his role in the M*A*S*H TV show. He played the role of Hawkeye Pierce, a gentle, wise-cracking surgeon in this wildly popular, decade-long TV series. Alda is also a six-time Emmy winner, a six-time Golden Globe winner and an Academy Award nominee.

Alan Alda nearly died in 2003 on a mountain in the remote region of Chile. He developed an intestinal obstruction during the filming of an episode for *Scientific American Frontier*. He came within an hour or two of dying.

Alda recovered from his illness and resumed acting. But this near death experience had a sobering effect upon his life. It provoked him to ask philosophical questions. What am I living for? What is the meaning of my life?

He reflected on old speeches he had given at commencement ceremonies, keynote addresses and various dedications. He decided to write a book, which he entitled *Things I Overheard While Talking to Myself*. Alda’s book is written with characteristic humor, warmth and sensitivity. He even pokes fun at his earlier ranting as a naïve Hollywood liberal.

What were his conclusions? He recommended that everyone ought to find something worthwhile to

do and people to be with. Okay, so far as it goes. But is that all? Find something worthwhile to do and loving people to be with?

When I first heard Minh Towner share her story with members of our Who is Jesus class in this church, it took my breath away. It was the kind of story I occasionally read about in books but never encountered firsthand. I was inspired by how God has given Minh uncommon strength to face such atrocities.

I am reminded of something psychiatrist Victor Frankl wrote in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Frankl was himself a prisoner in Hitler’s infamous Auschwitz death camp for three years during World War II. He wrote, “There is nothing in the world that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions, as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one’s life....He who has a ‘Why’ to live for can bear almost any ‘how.’”

Do you have a “why” to live for? Finding a “why” for living can trump “how” any day. When we discover a transcendent meaning and purpose for living, we find strength for how to live.

Today’s sermon is about life. Admittedly, the title of this sermon is rather lame. “The Life” corresponds to last Sunday’s sermon on “The Word,” which anticipates next Sunday’s sermon on “The Light.”

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John seeks, in the prologue of his gospel, to draw a deliberate parallel with the opening words of Genesis. His first words, “In the beginning,” set in bold relief the opening line of Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (1:1).

Genesis is fundamentally a story about life. Genesis chronicles how this living God called life into being. We read in Genesis, “God formed Adam from the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life: and Adam became a living creature” (Genesis 2:7).

Jesus’ coming represents a whole new era in salvation history. Jesus as the divine Word or logos, who existed with God from the very beginning (John 1:1-3), became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14-18).

Why do we need this new beginning? As author Ann Weems said so eloquently in her reading last Sunday, someone left the door open and in walked sin. Despite every excuse we can muster against this one little word, sin destroys life. Sin separates people from the life God intends for them.

Jesus’ coming offers new life to people. The conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus in chapter 3 about being born again is a classic discourse on the new life God offers people.

John’s gospel is replete with metaphors about this new life. Jesus spoke of himself in John 4 as living water that wells up to eternal life (10-14). Jesus referred to himself in John 6 as living bread that satisfies hungry hearts

(35-40). Jesus identified himself in John 8 as the light of the world that brings life to people (12). He likened himself in John 10 to the gateway to abundant living (10). He described himself as “The resurrection and the life” in chapter 11 (25-26) and as “the way, the truth and the life” in chapter 14 (6). He depicted himself in chapter 15 as the true vine which gives life to the branches (5-15).

Make no mistake about it, John’s gospel is all about life! If you took me up on the homework assignment issued last Sunday to read John’s gospel during the Advent season, you will undoubtedly find this gospel is all about life. It’s about life from the very outset: “In him was life” (1:4), just as it’s about life at the conclusion: “And these [words] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that by believing you might have life in his name” (20:31).

When Jesus spoke about eternal life, he had more in mind than whether people would go to heaven after they die. There is more to eternal life than whether we will make “the final cut.”

Now, I grant you, life after death is nothing to sneeze at! But life in the age to come is already available to us. Eternal life begins the very moment Jesus Christ takes up residence in our lives. Jesus said to his followers, “I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly” (10:10).

There are two Greek words for life in the Bible: *bios* and *zoe*. *Bios* refers to natural, chronological life.

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It's the kind of life we write about in people's biographies. *Zoe* represents the qualitative new life Jesus offers people. God has already given us *bios* life; what He offer you today is *zoe* life.

Pollster George Barna found in his research that 70 percent of Americans claim to have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is important to them. How is it we are able to claim so many Christians in our society, yet are having less and less impact on culture?

Maybe our message is narrowly concerned with people's sins and shortcomings but ignores the wider arena of daily living. Dallas Willard has coined a term for this disjunction between faith and real life. He calls it "the gospel of sin management," as though the Christian message deals primarily with sin. God is most assuredly concerned with the forgiveness of our sins but is also vitally interested in how we live our lives. God cares about the wider reach of our lives into the marketplace and home. God cares about our lives; indeed, our whole lives!

Our goal in this church is connecting faith to real life. That's why we place so much emphasis on discipleship. We are learning all our lives what it means to follow Jesus, precisely in the places where we live and work. One of my regrets in this church is that we haven't trained people to be disciples in the marketplace.

Helmut Thielicke served a church in Stuttgart, Germany during the Second World War. He

continued to preach about the life Jesus offers people to thousands of people every Sunday, despite massive bombings of the city and growing Nazi opposition. Suffice it to say that life was tenuous for Thielecke and his congregants. In the midst of the darkness of Hitler's Third Reich, Thielecke pointed his people to Jesus as life, not in some distant, far off way, but in a real present way.

As C. S. Lewis wrote in his book *The Problem of Pain*, "You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you."

Thielicke visited churches in the states after the war. When he was asked about the deficiencies of the church in America, he responded, "Americans have an inadequate view of suffering." It was the early 1960s, but it could have easily been 2007. We have this entitlement mentality in the west. We expect God to make us happy rather than make any demands on us.

Thielicke also asked whether our celebrities, who advertised foods and beverages, actually consumed what they were pitching. His question was obviously tongue in cheek. He went on to suggest that perhaps we in the church are not consuming what we are selling. Are we pitching a message that is irrelevant to our real lives?

Leo Tolstoy wrote one of the classic works of world literature *War and Peace*. He also wrote a lesser known work entitled *A Confession*, which tells the story of his search for meaning and purpose in life. Tolstoy rejected Christianity

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in his youth. He found that the faith of people in the church did not explain the meaning of life but rather obscured it. Tolstoy enrolled in the university to seek knowledge and pleasure. In Moscow and Petersburg, he drank heavily, lived promiscuously and gambled frequently. His ambition was to become wealthy and famous, but nothing satisfied him. In 1862, he married a loving wife and they had a large family. His books brought him wealth and fame. He was surrounded by what appeared to be complete happiness. Yet, one question continued to haunt him. "Is there any meaning in life which will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death, which awaits me?"

He searched for the answer in every field of science and philosophy. But as he looked around at his contemporaries, he saw that people were not facing up to the essential question on the meaning of life. He found the peasant people of Russia were able to answer these questions through their Christian faith. These peasants had a real faith, which alone gave their lives meaning and made it possible for them to live. Tolstoy came to realize that only in Jesus Christ do we find the answer.

Some of you will react to Jesus' offer of new life with cynicism. He cannot possibly give people new life—not in real life. Anything too good to be true must be too good

to be true. I can personally attest, if you authentically open your life to Christ, if you really get after it, you will become new!

