

“Live Life Before Death, Not Just After”
Rev. Bill Freeman
Sunday, April 2, 2017
Menifee United Church of Christ

A man is searching for the meaning of life. He hears about this guru, who sits on top of a big mountain, and who can tell him the meaning of life. So the man climbs to the top of the big mountain. He says to the guru, “What is the meaning of life?” The guru says, “Life is a Fountain.” The man says, “Life is a Fountain?! I climbed all the way up here to the top of this mountain to find the meaning of life, and you tell me it’s, “Life is a Fountain?!” The guru says, “Life isn’t a Fountain?”

Some say the meaning of life is to live it. Some people think the meaning of life is to do whatever you want. Pablo Picasso says, “The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away.” Some people don’t believe that life has any meaning at all. Life is just a meaningless series of events that don’t mean anything. Shakespeare said, “Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Wow. I don’t believe that. I believe life has meaning and it’s our job as Christians and the job of all human beings, really, to find the meaning of life.

Maybe the meaning of life is to help the homeless. This past week Lucia and I went to a homeless task force in the city of Menifee. People who gathered to find out how to help the homeless. Some people did want to find out how to get rid of the homeless, but most of the people were there to find out how to help the homeless. The city of Menifee is partnering with four other cities to try to help the homeless. The city of Menifee did a count recently that found that 14 people are homeless in the city. Many of us believe that’s about half or a third of what the actual number is. Maybe the meaning of life is to help the homeless.

Maybe the meaning of life is to be well-informed. This past week I sent a letter to Congressman Ken Calvert, a congressman representing this area, inviting Ken Calvert to come to a Town Hall meeting in this church on April 22 from 2:30 to 5:30. Several groups will be here to talk to Congressman Calvert and present information to the public – the NAACP, the AFL-CIO, Planned Parenthood, and others. Hopefully, Congressman Calvert will show and we can ask some questions, but if not, the different groups will make a presentation to the public. I hope you’ll show on April 22nd, from 2:30 to 5:30. Maybe the meaning of life is to stay well-informed.

Maybe the meaning of life is to have a little fun. This past weekend I took part in a Karaoke contest for charity. We raised about \$7500 for Community Cupboard. People had different acts: one woman was dressed as a cowgirl and carried a rifle. One guy had a long, curly wig and danced around the stage and sang Jon Bon Jovi songs. One group of nine people sang The Brady Bunch theme song. They had a tic tac toe board thing in front of their faces. I thought it was just going to be a karaoke contest where you just stand up and sing, so I had no act. I thought, what am I going to do? I was just going to sing Dean Martin’s “Everybody Loves Somebody Sometime.” Thankfully, I remembered that Dean Martin, when I saw his old TV shows, always had a drink in his hand. He always looked kind of drunk. So the announcer introduced me and said, “This is the first time we’ve ever had a reverend come to our karaoke contest!” So I grabbed my drink and stumbled up to the stage and people thought I was drunk. And I began to sing (singing in imitation of a drunk Dean Martin), “Everybody loves somebody sometime.” I didn’t win, but at least I had something. Because maybe the meaning of life is to have a little fun.

Jesus knows the meaning of life, of course, because he’s Jesus. Part of the meaning of life for Jesus, I think, is to make sure that people live. Lazarus was ill, according to the gospel of John. Martha and Mary, Lazarus’ sisters, sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was ill, please come. Lazarus, Mary and Martha are friends of Jesus. Jesus gets word that Lazarus is ill and says, “It’s not as if the guy is going to die or anything.” So Jesus takes his own sweet time getting to Lazarus. After a couple of days, Jesus says to his disciples, “We need to go to Lazarus because Lazarus has fallen asleep.” The disciples say, “Well, if he’s fallen asleep that’s no big deal. He’ll wake up.” Jesus said, “No, you don’t understand, Lazarus is dead.” So they go to where Lazarus is and Martha goes and greets Jesus and says, “Jesus, if you’d been here, my brother would still be alive. But I know that you can perform miracles.” Jesus says, “Lazarus will rise again. Do you believe that? Because I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will have eternal life. Do you believe that?” She says, “Yes, Lord, I do.” Then Mary shows up and Mary says, “Jesus, if you’d been here, Lazarus would still be alive.” Then Mary weeps and Jesus weeps. Then Jesus goes to the tomb that Lazarus is buried in. Jesus has them remove the stone and Jesus cries, “Lazarus, come out!” Lazarus comes out all bandaged up like a mummy. People who saw this believed in Jesus.

Some people believe that the meaning of life is to believe in Jesus. That if you believe in Jesus, you will have eternal life. I believe that Jesus is life. That’s the meaning of life, that Jesus is all about life. Jesus said, also in the gospel of John, “I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly.” So Jesus is life and Jesus wants us to have life.

Jesus wants us to have love, and that is also the meaning of life. It says in First John 4:16 that “God is love.” Jesus himself was asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” and he says, “To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength

and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself." Then in First Corinthians 13 Paul says, "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love." So Jesus wants us to have love.

Jesus wants us to help others, and that could be the meaning of life. Because Jesus helped others and we are to help others. It says in Micah 6:8, "God has told you, O mortal what is good, and what does God require of you, but to do justice and to love kindness." Jesus helped others by feeding the hungry and curing the sick and raising the dead. That is the meaning of life.

St. Irenaeus was an early church father, an early church leader. He was a leader in the second century. He says that, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." That's the meaning of life, I think, to be a human being fully alive. Whatever we do, we are to be a human being fully alive. Whatever we do, whatever we want to do – go skydiving and be a human being fully alive. Take a trip to Paris and be a human being fully alive. Do art work and be a human being fully alive. That is the meaning of life.

A little three year old girl is a human being fully alive. Maybe you saw this in the news. Her family took her to Rome, to the Vatican, to St. Peter's Square, and she got to meet the pope. The pope reached down to kiss her on the cheek and as he did so, she took his skullcap and the pope laughed and got his skullcap back, but I think, in that moment, the Pope and the little girl were living life fully alive. That's what we're supposed to do. That's what St. Irenaeus wants us to do.

Some people are afraid to live life, for whatever reason, they seem to be afraid of life. Some people are afraid to fly. I was afraid to fly years ago, until one time I took a flight and next to me were two little girls, a five-year-old and a three year old. I thought, I don't want to look afraid in front of these little girls, I don't want them to be afraid, so I acted like flying was just wonderful! Like a stand-up comic I heard once, who said, "I'm not afraid to fly, I'm just afraid to crash." Anyway, these little girls were impressionable, so I said, "Oh, isn't this wonderful, flying? Look at how small the people are down there as we take off." I asked one of the little girls, the five-year-old, "What's your name?" She said "My name's April." Then I, the stand-up comic, asked, "And what's your sister's name, May?" "No," she answered, "That's my name, April May Smith." I didn't dare ask what her sister's name was, because I thought it might be June July Smith, but I tried to give them life by being loving and giving them the kind of love Jesus wants us all to have. "I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly."

Some people seem to want to delay life until they get into heaven. They don't want to live life now. They want to live life in the hereafter. My first job out of college I was the news director at a Christian radio station. This was back before I really was a Christian. They would play a song that talked about one day walking on streets of gold in heaven. I had a problem with that on two levels. I thought, what good is gold in heaven? But, of course, it's streets of gold, so we're walking on gold, that was valuable here on earth and it's not valuable in heaven – they pave the streets with it. But the other thing was, it was like they were waiting to get to heaven to have life. I think we're not supposed to do that. I think we're supposed to have life now, to have life before death, not just after. I believe Jesus believes that same thing.

Beauty and the Beast is a wonderful movie. Kathleen and I saw it last weekend. Unfortunately, the theater we were in was kind of dusty and I had to wipe my eyes a couple of times because of the dust. Beauty and the Beast, as you probably know, is about the story of the Beast who has to find love, who has to give up his old hateful ways and be loving. Spoiler alert: That happens. He falls in love with Belle and she falls in love with him. That was when the dust got in my eyes. But that's what we're supposed to do. People are supposed to give up their hateful ways and love. People are supposed to give up their selfish ways and love. People are supposed to give up their prejudiced ways and love. It's as if Jesus said to people who are living in a tomb of hate, "Come out!" It's as if Jesus says to people who are living in a tomb of selfishness, "Come out!" It's as if Jesus says to people who are buried in a tomb of prejudice, "Come out!" Because Jesus wants us all to live life fully alive, to live life before death and not just after.

Frank Sinatra lived life fully alive, I believe. Now granted, he wasn't perfect, but who among us is perfect? But I believe Frank Sinatra lived life fully alive. I was surprised to learn that he resented his signature song, "My Way." He thought it was self-indulgent and self-absorbed. Paul Anka wrote the song for Frank Sinatra, which he sang all the time, of course, but I think it describes the kind of life that St. Irenaeus would say was fully alive. Frank Sinatra sings, "And now, the end is near, and so I face the final curtain. My friend, I'll say it clear, I'll state my case, of which I'm certain. I've lived a life that's full; I've travelled each and every highway. But more, much more than this, I did it my way." Frank Sinatra did live life his way.

I know we're supposed to live life God's way and Christians are supposed to live Jesus' way, but I think St. Irenaeus would say that, if you live a life that's full and if you travel each and every highway, then you have lived life fully alive. You have lived life before death, and not just after, which is what I think we're supposed to do. So take that trip to Hawaii. Go scuba diving in the Caribbean. Go climb Mt. Everest. Go take that art class. Go write that Great American novel. Go live life fully alive. That's what we're supposed to do.

Now we don't know much about Lazarus. Before his death or even after he was brought back to life by Jesus. But I'll bet after he was brought back to life by Jesus, Lazarus did live life fully alive. I'll bet he did see the beauty of the earth. I'll bet he saw the glory of the skies. That's what we're supposed to do. We're supposed to live life fully alive. We're supposed to see the

beauty of the earth. We're supposed to see the glory of the skies. We're supposed to live life fully alive. To live life before death, and not just after.

Let us pray:
God of love,
Help us to live life fully alive.
Help us to live life before death, and not just after.
And help us to have life and have it abundantly.
Now and forever after.
By the power of the Holy Spirit.
And in the name of Jesus.
Amen.

(This sermon was delivered without manuscript or notes
and was transcribed from a recording of it.)