

Sermon: Your Wild and Precious Life  
Text: Acts 18:1-3  
Date: September 4, 2016  
Context: WWPC  
Labor Day Sunday  
Outdoor worship

*Paul went to see them . . . by trade they were tentmakers.*

Acts 18:2b, 3b.

On its face, this short passage seems quite straightforward. Paul left Athens, went to Corinth, found some people who do the same work he does, and stayed with them for the duration of his visit. The end.

But scratch the surface even a little bit and this short little story raises all sorts of questions. Why did Paul leave Athens? Why did he travel to Corinth and not to Ephesus, or Damascus? Who, exactly, were this couple whom he met, this Aquila and Priscilla? And how or where, exactly, did he meet them?

Oh, wait, then there's the part about how Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. I'm sorry, am I hearing that right? Once again the Jews are on the move. What was this forced exodus about, exactly?

I'm sure that answers are available to all of these questions should we wish to pursue them. I'm also sure some of those answers are available right in the book of Acts itself.

But apart from these historical details, the one thing that struck me reading this passage – and it's admittedly less a scholarly detail and more a personal point – is how very lucky I am.

It is a hard fact of life that that we do not always get paid to do what we love. It's not even true that we will necessarily get paid to do what we feel called to do. That is, even when we believe we're doing God's work, we don't always get paid for it.

Historically this has been especially true for people who felt called to work in the church, or to serve in the ministry. It certainly was true for Paul.

This is not a surprise, really. It would be several centuries before a professional class of clergy became a permanent fixture in the life of the church.

Which is why Paul of Tarsus is the Apostle Paul and not, say, the Rev. Paul of the First Presbyterian Church of Tarsus.

And it's why he made tents. Because, like all of us, he had to do something to pay the bills and put food on the table. At the time he enters the biblical story and steps on to history's stage, there was no such thing as a job as a professional clergy person, at least not in Christian circles.

But from the moment of his famous conversion on the road to Emmaus, the moment he went from being Saul of Tarsus to the Apostle Paul, Paul knew what we wanted to do. He knew what he was called to do.

He was called to be an apostle to the Gentiles. He just made tents because he had to, if he expected to eat and pay for his travel expenses.

So for Paul the question of what he was meant to do with his life was obvious, even if he had to maintain a paying job on the side to keep body and soul together. But for many of us, perhaps even most of us, this is not necessarily the case.

The poet Mary Oliver seems to understand this. Listen to how she puts this question in her poem, *The Summer Day*:

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean--  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down --  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
With your one wild and precious life?

*What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

It is one of life's most fundamental questions. It is also, often, a hard one to answer. It's hard because the answer tends to define not just the 9-5 part of our lives. It can pervade the whole of our lives.

In his book, *The Call*, the Christian writer Oz Guinness notes that in the United States we habitually associate our identity with what we do. So that if you ask someone that question – what do you do – the answer is, “I am a teacher” or “I am a student” or “I am a doctor” or “I am a mom and a homemaker.”

According to Mr. Guinness, there are a couple of problems with this convention. And they're easy to appreciate. First, think about the logic of that response for a second. *I am a teacher*. Really, is that who you are? Yes, that's what you do. But is that who you are?

More to the point, for people of faith, there's a deeper question we should be asking, one that lies underneath the surface of what we do. And that is, what would God have us do? What are we called to do? So, not just what is our work but what is our calling, our vocation?

For faithful folk, Guinness argues that a sense of calling should precede a choice of job or career. And the best way to discover your call is to think about your gifts, for they point to an answer to the question of what we might be called to do.

This view reverses the traditional thinking of, “You *are* what you do.” Instead, the logic of calling is “Do what you are.” Do what you love. Do what you are gifted for, for that's what you're good at.

I think there is great wisdom in this idea. If only everyone had the luxury to pursue it.

Unfortunately in the real world, the question of finding our calling is not quite this simple.

Consider the possibilities. Perhaps you love to parasail. You're a strong athlete. You have excellent upper body strength, you're exceptionally coordinated, and you have no fear.

Or you love to raise orchids in the little hothouse you've built on your back porch. Most people can't keep an orchid alive to save themselves, but you're exceptionally good at it. You have not just a green thumb but two green hands.

Or you love to play video games. Your sense of anticipation and your reaction times are noticeably more advanced than your friend, Enrique's.

If the question of finding one's calling comes down simply to doing what you're good at, doing what you love, doing what you are, as it were, then you've found yours.

Except that, unless you're good enough to go pro, or willing to build a commercial greenhouse on your property, there's no money in parasailing or playing video games or growing orchids.

So what do you do? Where do you go from here? Or maybe a better question is, if you're still looking for an answer to what you're going to do with your wild and precious life, where do you start?

For me this question was rooted in a lingering sense that I was, in fact, meant to do something specific with my life. I felt this for as long as I can remember. I also secretly believed that the "person" who planted this sense deep inside me was, well, God.

But! I grew up in a religious tradition that did not have a vocabulary for vocation and calling. It wasn't something my pastor or youth group leader talked about.

So, I just lived with this sensation: that I was meant to do something specific with my life, and that this was God's idea more than mine. I also tried not to talk about this too much for fear my classmates in high school would not take this news well.

But then, as you may have heard me say before, on an early mission trip to Haiti, I happened to look into the eyes of some hungry children on the streets of Port-au-Prince.

It was like they were channeling the spirit of Mary Oliver, asking me what I was planning to do with my life. And, even more to the point, asking how what I was planning to do with my life related to helping to relieve their hunger.

The memory of those eyes haunted for years – it still does – and I spent the next ten years working for two different Christian aid agencies, traveling first to Africa then around the world, trying to work out an answer to that question.

But there's the thing. The work I was doing in the field of international relief and development was meaningful and important, and I'm glad I did it. But in the end I realized it was not *my* work.

So I think this is part of finding an answer to Mary Oliver's question. First you have to figure out who you are *not*.

I am not a Baptist or a Lutheran. Yes, my mom and dad are, or were, but that's not who I am.

I do not belong in Alabama, or Massachusetts, or even South Dakota. Yes, that's where I was born and where my family lives, but that's not who I am, or where I am meant to be.

I was not born to do relief work in Haiti or Mozambique, at least not as my vocation.

For me, in the end, the answer to the question of what I was meant to do with my wild and precious life was go to seminary, get my M.Div. degree and enter ordained ministry. And to be a Presbyterian pastor, not a Baptist.

The good news for me – the reason I feel so lucky – is that I do indeed get paid to do this work. I do not have to make tents to pay my bills, which is a mercy because I would be very bad at that!

But of course ordained ministry is not the answer for most people. It wasn't for William Wilberforce, even though he thought it was. And the world is better because of that.

Wilberforce came to faith relatively late, at the age of 25. He was already an activist at the time of his conversion. But the experience of coming to Christ as a young adult was so powerful for him he very nearly gave up his political work and reform initiatives for a career in the church.

It was a minister – John Newton in fact, a converted slave trader and the author of “Amazing Grace” – who persuaded Wilberforce to stay in politics rather than enter the ministry.

Apparently Newton could see what Wilberforce could not: that his gifts were more suited for the rough and tumble world of parliamentary politics than the rough and tumble world of ordained ministry.

“It is hoped and believed,” Newton wrote, “that the Lord has raised you up for the good of the nation” (Oz Guinness, *The Calling*, pg. 29).

What happened next is that Wilberforce literally changed the world. He made the abolition of slavery his singular cause in life. Nowadays you might think that this was an obvious choice. Slavery and its Siamese twin, racism, are so horrific, so morally repugnant, you might wonder why someone didn’t do it before him.

But at the time abolishing slavery was a hopeless cause. It was believed by almost everyone that the British economy, the world economy, depended on slaves to keep its engines running. It would have been like advocating today for the end of the oil-based economy. Sheer lunacy.

And yet he did it anyway. The historian G.M. Trevelyan would later describe Wilberforce’s success as “one of the turning events in the history of the world.”

It was very hard work, deeply unpopular. He faced violent opposition at times, and it took him many years before he achieved his abolitionist goals. So it was fortunate that Wilberforce found an answer to the question of what he was meant to do with his life early on.

That may happen to you. You may know what you are meant to do by the time you’re five or 15 or 25. But the good news for the rest of us is that these callings sometimes come much later in life. And sometimes they find you more than you find them.

My mother-in-law, Betty Castellani, was in her 50s when she finally discovered the answer to what she was meant to do with her one wild and precious life.

Everything she did before this point mattered: She was the office manager of a leading law firm in Atlanta, while also raising two kids and being a loving wife and an awesome mom.

But as her kids got older, she felt a new calling stirring inside of her. She felt like God had something more for her to do. First she went to college to get her BA. To give her time to go to class and do her homework, she made casseroles on Sunday that her family could enjoy the rest of the week.

Then, having earned her BA, she enrolled in Candler Divinity School. Three years later, M.Div. in hand, she took a call as an associate pastor at Clairmont Presbyterian Church.

This may strike you as a perfectly straightforward arc. But make no mistake. This was a big deal. For this was 1982 and Betty was not only a woman but a woman approaching 50.

Much to her surprise, she quickly realized that she did not love working inside the church. What Betty did love was working with cancer patients to create hope in their lives. So she took a job as a chaplain in a hospital.

(Parenthetically, it should be noted that at every step of this journey from working in a law firm to working in a church to working in a hospital, Betty made less money than she did before. As we noted earlier, finding one's calling is not a guaranteed path to financial success.)

Chaplaincy was a better fit for her but there was still something more she was meant to do. And one day that something came knocking at her door.

One of the doctors at the hospital had seen how good she was working with cancer patients. And so one day he asked her to help him establish a full-on cancer center at DeKalb Medical. That conversation changed Betty's life and gave her the work that would define her career.

She came to it in stages. She came to it 30 years later in her life than William Wilborce did in his.

What is it you plan to do with your life? Sometimes the answer to this question comes late in our life's journey. Sometimes it finds you. And sometimes it comes not just to you but to the larger group that helps give shape to your life.

As most of you know for the last year we've been engaged in a forward planning process here at WWPC. As you also know, the process was centered around discerning answers to this very question: who is calling us to be as a congregation, and what God is calling us to do?

I've touched on this process in sermons a number of times recently, so I'm only going to make this one brief point here today: That we're going to flip the script a bit as we answer these questions.

Ordinarily during stewardship season, say, or sometimes at other times of the year, we ask you to join our existing committees, or to support the ministries we already have in place.

But in response to your feedback we have developed five goals for our congregation moving forward. Within the context of these goals, we're going to invite you to think about what you might love to do, what you have energy and passion for.

Then, we're going to encourage you to find a friend or two, or a group of friends, who share your passion, and to form a little or not so little team and get to work to fulfill it.

Which leaves only one question: what do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

It could be making casseroles for homebound people or baking fresh loaves of bread to give to visitors on Sunday morning. Or it could be making fresh banners for our church, or singing in our choir, or teaching a Sunday school class, or helping us manage our money.

For that matter, pursuing your passion and answering Mary Oliver's question could take you outside the bounds of this church. It could be feeding hungry kids in Haiti or helping cancer patients at Mission Hospital find hope.

You never know where this question might take you. And maybe that's exactly the way it should be.