

“You’re Here for a Reason”

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Micah 6:8, Galatians 5:22-26, John 15:12-17

I’m not sure we could have picked a better book to read for a baptism Sunday than the one Liz read earlier. *You’re here for a Reason* is precisely what we claim on behalf of those whom we baptize. Little Teddy is not just on this earth to bring delight to his parents and his grandparents, his cousins and aunts and uncles, though he surely does that. The waters of baptism claim him for a deeper purpose than just being part of his biological family, they claim him—and us—for the work of following Jesus in embodying love in the world. Listen now for three brief texts of scripture, the first from Micah 6:8, the prophet Micah’s words of challenge to the leaders and the people of Judah and Israel. Yahweh has brought a suit against them for breaking the covenant through their lack of honesty, justice, and kindness.

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

Our second text is from Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia. To people in early Christian communities in that region, Paul writes that one is made right with God not through their own efforts to adhere to the law, but through a grace that leads to faith—and that faith naturally gives rise to his list of the fruit of the Spirit—that’s the indicator of life lived in the way of Jesus:

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Finally, from the Gospel of John part of Jesus’ long discourse in the Upper Room, as he addressed his disciples on the night of his arrest. Listen for what he says to them about their purpose, the reason why they were chosen, or appointed.

‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.’

Last Saturday afternoon, Judith and I had the privilege of being attendance for the funeral of a man named Michael Taylor. We were there with about 500 other people, many of them members and friends of Swansboro United Methodist Church in Swansboro, North Carolina, the congregation that Judith’s mom and dad and brother and sister-in-law and my nephews and niece attend.

Michael had served the larger community as a music educator in the Onslow County schools for 35 years and he had been a pianist and vocalist for that congregation for the past 29. Given that Judith and I have been going down together to that area on vacation for at least a week every year since before we were married 28 years ago, and attending worship every Sunday while we were there, we came to know Michael pretty well. Michael was a gifted musician, who deeply and authentically felt the songs he played and sang, and as one of the pastors who eulogized him said, he may have been the kindest person any of us in that sanctuary had ever met. In true Southern style, Michael greeted everyone he met by calling them Shug. He always had a warm smile and a hug and some conversation for me and Judith and our daughters every time he saw us. And every time we left, he said, ‘it was good to see you, Shug.’”

As I sat in the pew during Michael Taylor’s service, I found myself weeping to an extent that surprised even me. Part of my emotional response was due to the fact that Judith and I really had come to know and love that man over these years—and we certainly felt loved and appreciated by him. Part of my response was brought on by the sheer loveliness of the music chosen and sung, including a recording of Michael himself singing *Jesus, You’re the Center of My Joy*. Part of my response, I think, was deep sadness that the fact that Michael was a gay man—and his partner was in attendance that day—went totally unacknowledged. And frankly, part of my response was ongoing grief from having helped lead 11 memorial services for other dear children of God already this year. All of that grief just welled up in me now that I was not up front, but sitting in the pews. But I think, as much as anything else, what brought tears to me and so many others that morning was that Michael understood that he was here for a reason—and he used his talents and his gifts, his personality and his very self in service of that reason. He knew he was put on this earth to bear fruit, the fruit of the Spirit and be a blessing to others and he did just that. When we celebrate a life that is centered in such purpose, it touches something deep within us—because that is all too rare.

All too many people in this world struggle because they forget or never really understand their reason for being here on this earth. We get confused and think it is about amassing more stuff, or getting more recognition, or winning and keeping people’s approval, or protecting ourselves, our things, and our egos. But from the perspective of a life centered in Christ that’s not the reason we’re here at all. The fundamental reason we are here—this goes for any and all of us who claim the name of Jesus in our baptismal vows—the fundamental reason we are here is to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves, or as Micah put it, to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with God, or as Paul put it, to bear the fruit of the Spirit. That’s it. We have different gifts and talents, we have different personalities and proclivities, we have different things to offer the world and we should offer those things, but our primary purpose is to stay centered in God’s love and to use our gifts to help others. That’s what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, Teddy. That’s what it means.

In his discourse with his disciples in the upper room on the night before he is arrested, at least in John’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, fruit that will shape what you ask of God, fruit that will lead you to love each other.”

I *appointed* you, he tells them. I appointed you for a reason.

It’s an interesting word, *appointed*. It makes you think of appointments, like the appointment that James and Elizabeth and Teddy and I had to have a dry run before is baptism. It makes you think of setting aside time for a meeting or some other activity, or selecting someone for a committee, or naming them to a political or judicial post.

The English word appointed only shows up in the Gospels four times--twice in relation to the calling of the 12 disciples in Mark, once in relation to the sending out of the seventy in Luke, and here, in John's Gospel—once, with reference to being chosen to go and bear fruit.

But what's more interesting to me than the English word appointed is the Greek word from which it is translated. The word is *tithAYmee*, which looks a lot like tithe, by the way, but it is not the same word—though both refer to setting something aside. In John's Gospel, that same Greek word *tithaymee* is used only a few other times in different contexts. When Jesus changes the water into wine at a wedding banquet, the chief wine steward says to the groom, "Most other people *tithAYmee* the good wine first, and save the inferior stuff for last. But you, you *tithAYmeed* the good wine til now." And then in John 10, when Jesus is talking about being the Good Shepherd, he says, "The Good Shepherd *tithaymees* his life for the sheep." In John 15, Jesus says he *tithAYmees* the disciples to bear fruit. In John 19, Pilate has a sign *tithaymeed* to the cross, which says Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, and finally, Jesus is *tithaymeed* into a tomb.

He's appointed, he's set aside, he's laid down. That, by the way, is what we mark in baptism. We *tithAYmee* little ones, or older children, or adults.

So a few observations.

1. Today we baptized little Teddy McIntyre. Whatever else baptism is, it is our way of acknowledging that people who follow Jesus have been *tithaymeed*—appointed, set out to be the good wine that brings joy to the party that is God's kindom, called to live a life that is willing to lay down ego, pride, and life itself for the sake of others in Love's name. A life that bears the fruit of the Spirit, which only comes when we are willing to give ourselves up.

2. Over the course of his life in this congregation, it is my hope that little Teddy as he grows into big Teddy will again and again learn what it means that he has been *tithaymeed*. In Sunday School through learning the stories of Jesus and engaging in projects meant to serve, in Confirmation and youth group when with others he claims for himself that he has been *tithaymeed* and learns that a life appointed to bear fruit looks like joy, love, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. In his life here in this congregation—or elsewhere as he grows up and out—it is my hope that little Teddy who will become big Teddy learns and acts on the truth that he has been set aside, he has been appointed, he is here for a reason

3. To say that Teddy is here for a reason and you are here for a reason and I am here for a reason does not mean that there is a reason for everything that happens to us. Do you get the distinction? WE are here for a reason, but sometimes things happen that are awful and we cannot discern why. But in the midst of all of that, in the midst of it, when we can't figure out any reason why some terrible thing has happened, we can remember that WE are here for a reason. And thank goodness and thank goodness times two that God has appointed us to be agents of love even in the middle of hard times, when we are not sure what the reason is for what we are facing. To know that you are here for a reason doesn't mean that there is a reason for everything that happens to you, or that you have to understand the reason even if there is. It just means that when bad things happen, you remember who you are and why you're here

4. Yesterday, the nation learned of the death of John McCain, a true statesman and a man of honesty, integrity, and duty who was willing to sacrifice himself throughout his life and was able to acknowledge that he had made mistakes from time to time. He may not have been elected President,

or appointed to certain posts, but as a serviceman, a statesman, and a senator he showed what a *tithaymeed* life looks like, and in so doing, it must be said that he stands in stark contrast to those who mocked or criticized him. If we cannot tell that truth in this place, then where on earth are we going to tell it?

5. Back to Michael Taylor, that beautiful man. The person who preached his eulogy quoted from a song that Michael loved and loved to sing. Like me, the preacher that day told the organist that he was not going to sing it. Every time I quote lyrics from a song, that's what I do, but usually I tell Brian.

The song centers in a reference to Moses and his staff and God's question to him in Exodus 3. Here are the words:

*When you have a work to do
And the task ahead seems bigger than you
That's when He steps in
When you know in your heart that God's command
Takes more than can be done by man
That's when He steps in
He sees you at the point of your need
He sees you at the point of crossing your Red Sea
In the moment you call
When you've given your all
He steps in, He steps in
And He'll say,*

*What's that you have in your hand?
I can use it, if you're willing to lose it
Take the little you have and make it grand
I am El-Shaddai and I'll more than supply your need*

*When all you have is oil in a jar
That's a reflection of where you are
That's when He steps in
A little boy's lunch of fish and bread
Is all you have for the need ahead
That's when He steps in*

*Let Him take it and bless it and break it and give it
He'll multiply it in the moment you live it
And in the moment you call
When you've given your all,
He steps in, He steps in
And He'll say,*

(As he said to Moses, with his staff, by the way)

*What's that you have in your hand?
I can use it, if you're willing to lose it
Take the little you have and make it grand
I am El-Shaddai and I'll more than supply*

*I'll supply
I will supply your need*

Teddy, some day, when you most need to hear it, when it is difficult to make sense of the reason something has happened to you or someone you love, I hope someone will remind you of your baptism day, and recall for you what it means to bear the fruit of the spirit, and help you remember that even if you can't figure out any reason for what has happened to you, You are still here for a reason. When they do that, I hope they'll also remind you to *thank goodness, and thank goodness times two*, that nowhere in the world is there someone just like you.

Tillman, Nancy. *You are Here for a Reason*. Feiwei & Friends, September 1, 2015. Print.

Smallwood, Richard. "Jesus, You are the Center of my Joy." The Richard Smallwood Singers Live. By Writer Gloria Gaither. ~~Bill Gaither. The Richard Smallwood Singers. 1993. Live Performance.~~