

“It’s not about you!”

“It’s not about you! The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It’s far greater than your family, your career, or even your individual dreams and ambitions.... You were born by his purpose and for his purpose.”

So begins the amazingly popular book, “The Purpose Driven Life” (2002) by Pastor Rick Warren. (Over 30 million copies have been sold, making this book one of the most popular and influential books of any kind in the past decade.)

As I ponder Pastor Warren’s opening declaration, it strikes me how this understanding of Christianity stands in stark contrast to the cultural assumptions of our time and indeed, of our church members. We think that it is all about us! It is about our fulfillment and happiness. It is about meeting our needs. It is about being successful and secure.

While our founding national documents bind us together as a community and nation, they also are grounded in an understanding of individualism—that we are each entitled to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. In other words, our democratic system of governance as well as our consumer culture are founded on the principle that each individual has needs and wants which ought to be valued, honored and pursued.

Ours is a consumer culture. Our economic system is based on consuming. And this day, commonly known as “Black Friday”, is the ultimate high feast day of consumerism. This is the day to do some serious “Christmas” shopping. This is the day to get the bargains. On Black Friday our retail stores begin to make a profit for the year, moving from red ink to black.

Our individual, consumer driven culture extends to our churches. In Cumberland County along, we have about 400 congregations! Each congregation offers a slightly different set of beliefs, styles of worship and music, clergy personalities, size, programs, etc. And so we naturally “shop” for a congregation. Many visitors to my church routinely and politely tell me on their first visit that they are “church shopping”. And sad to say, all pastors will tell you that from time to time, dear members of our congregations will announce to us that they are moving on to another congregation where “their needs are met”. It is all about our needs. It is all about us.

This is the great paradox and contradiction. If we are honest, why would we stay in a church which didn’t help us in our spiritual journey? Why wouldn’t we naturally seek a congregation and a denomination which “meets our needs”. Yet the Scripture is full of admonitions about putting aside our agendas. As the late Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple once wrote, “The church is the only organization which exists for the benefit of those who aren’t its members”. Pastor Warren would agree. We have gotten things turned around. If you are going to find true purpose in your life, you need to begin by not seeking personal fulfillment, enlightenment, success, or peace.

I don’t have an answer for this paradox. I struggle with it. Like anyone, I see the world through my own eyes and filter everything through the prisms of my experience, values, and intuition.

Of course, a major prism is my faith, the Bible, and the teachings and traditions of my church. Even still, I don't claim to have the only truth, but I do believe that God has the truth. I believe that God has a purpose for me. And God's purpose for me is far greater than being successful.

At times I feel captive to consumerism, especially at this time of year as I look forward to giving and receiving presents at Christmas. In all honesty, I know that to some extent, I am in competition with other churches. I want my own needs to be met. But I hear Pastor Warren: it isn't about me, or my church. It is about how God will use me. I hope to joyfully accept that call and trust that along the way, I will get my share of needs met.

So, Happy High Feast Day of Consumerism! But, as you go about meeting your needs, listen to the voice whispering in your ear- "It is not about you"!

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