

“The Meaning Of Life”

RYAN PHIPPS, SENIOR MINISTER

11/26/17



CHURCH IN
Bethesda

PSYCHICS NEXT DOOR

I walked out of my apartment on Friday and headed toward the coffee shop on the corner to grab my morning cappuccino. On the way there, for the 1000th time, I walked past the psychic reader shop next to my building. There was a big sign out front that read, “10 Dollar Special, Today Only.”

The block that I live on is great. There’s a bank, a craft beer place, a Starbucks, and a psychic. Everything that one needs to make it in this world.

Anyway, I saw the sign and thought to myself, “a 10 dollar special what? A reading? A cluster of crystals? A set of Tarot Cards? A magic orb? What?”

I was intrigued, so I thought to myself, “I have ten dollars and I’ve always wanted to know what goes on in there.” So I started down the steps to the

entrance and then stopped and thought, “Nahhhh, this is awkward. I’m not going in there. This is probably some kind of scam.”

So I’ve still never been to a psychic. Maybe I’ll work up the nerve to go in one day.

The reason I didn’t have the nerve to go in was because of how I’ve been programmed to think of that profession in my mind.

Forgive me if you’re here this morning and you’re a psychic. I’m not mocking your profession in the least. I just don’t know anything about it except what I’ve seen on television and it leaves me with far too many questions. But if you truly are psychic, you already knew that I was going to say that.

A LOT LIKE CHURCH

So I walked away from the psychic place thinking, “I bet that’s how a lot of people feel when they walk by a church.” They see the sign out front that says something vague, but welcoming like, “‘How To Fix Your Life’ this Sunday at 11 AM” or “God loves you, and so do we. Visit us this Sunday.” Or “God wants you to be happy. Information inside.”

And I wonder how many people read those things and think to themselves, “That sounds nice, but I just can’t work up the nerve to go in there. It’s probably a scam. After all, the only thing I know about churches is what I see on television.”

TODAY’S TEXT

Today, I want to talk about the meaning of life, what it is, and more importantly, what it isn’t. And I want to

talk about it today in a way you might not expect to hear about it in a church.

Psychics are supposed to tell you what the future holds.

People in my profession, pastors, are supposed to tell you what the meaning of life is. We're supposed to tell you that faith and God are the most important thing in your life.

“Put God at the center of your life and everything else will fall into place.”
That's what people like me tell you for a living.

But guess what? It's not true.

It may shock you to hear a pastor say that, but it's something I believe with my whole heart.

Our passage for today says this, and here is where find what the meaning of life truly is.

My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God.

The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can't know him if you don't love.

No one has seen God, ever. But if we love one another, God dwells deeply within us, and his love becomes complete in us.

— 1 John 4:7-16

This passage has some alarming things to say to us, especially if we were raised to believe that faith is the central thing human in life. It also dashes to pieces the idea that only people who call themselves “Christian,” or who go to

church every week, or read their bibles, or pray every day are a little bit closer to God than everyone else.

In fact, it says nothing even remotely close to that. It simply says, *“Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God.”*

Wait. What?!

But what about all that I’ve done for God? What about all that I’m doing for God? I got baptized! I show up to church every Sunday! I memorized the book of Leviticus! I pray! I do nice things for people!

Yeah, nope. Sorry. You’re no closer to God than anyone else. But good news. You’re not farther away, either.

AGNOSTICS

Some of my closest friends are agnostics. I like agnostics. I'm an agnostic every morning until I've had three or four cups of coffee, then I start believing in God again. So I know how that feels.

Anyway, the thing I love about my agnostic friends is how they challenge what I believe. They keep me honest. And as a guy who works in a field that often defaults toward belief without ever really questioning it, I need to be kept honest.

Anyway, one of my agnostic friends teaches pottery in Kentucky. But many years ago, he and I both lived in the same neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I had started a church there in the city, and he and his daughter came to church every week. Why? I don't really know. But they were

there every Sunday listening to me pontificate on some antiquated passage of scripture.

We took communion every week at this church just like we do here at CiB. My friend never participated, but he always watched. And one week after church he came up to me and said, “I don’t know what the thing is with the crackers and wine, but that stuff you’re serving it off of is hideous! Would you mind if I made you some plates and goblets?” And I said, “Sure! Thank you! I’d love that!”

And this began a relationship that would cause me to see God more clearly in my life in the following years than I could have ever imagined. He and I would sit up late talking about the mysteries of the cosmos, and theology was always a part of the conversation. He’d grill me with questions that forced me to clarify what I believed on the spot without any preparation. My answers

may have been helpful to him, but they were even more helpful to me.

One evening he was asking me what it felt like to experience God. In other words, what was the tangible, observable evidence of this thing that I believed in?

And I said to him, “Do you ever look in on your daughter while she’s sleeping and there she is safe and at peace, and you have a kind of overwhelming feeling of gratitude and love that is bigger than you can put into words?”

“Of course.” He responded.

I kept going. “Do you ever see somebody in a hurry to somewhere and they rush by someone who just dropped something or needs help, and they stop and turn around and help the person and you think to yourself, ‘Wow. There’s still a lot of good in people.’”

“Yes.” He said.

So I kept going. “Do you ever wonder what makes Doctors go into war torn regions of the world, deliberately putting themselves in harm’s way to bring medical treatment to people who will never be able to afford to compensate them for their efforts?”

“Sure.” He said.

“You may call that altruism, or compassion, or love. I call it, ‘God.’”

“That’s what it’s like.” I said. “Anytime I experience love, whether it’s being shown to someone else, or shown to me, I would call that ‘experiencing God.’”

And he sat for a minute, and the gears were turning, and then he asked, “Okay. But why church, then? Why the crackers and the wine? Why the dunking people in water business? Why

the whole ‘I need to be saved by Jesus bit?’ Why Jesus at all? Why any of the religious stuff?”

I responded, “Because all of those things, when practiced for their intended purpose are symbols that are supposed to be pointing us to lives where we give and receive love more completely. Unfortunately, we often end up making gods out of the symbols, though and we miss the entire point.”

And he said, “But I already believe that. That’s why I bring my daughter to church. I understand the meaning of symbolism and that she is learning things there that make her a more loving person. Are you telling me that I know God, then?”

And I responded, “According to what scripture teaches, I’d say, ‘Yes. You do.’”

And for the first time in his life, I think he got a glimpse of what it all meant. What's more. So did I. He may have thought that I was enlightening him, but in truth, he was enlightening me.

Thank God for people who challenge us.

THE MEANING OF LIFE

The meaning of life is not faith. The meaning of life is not God. The meaning of life is not cars, or properties, or possessions. **The meaning of life is loving people, and being loved by people.** And in that exchange we realize God.

We may think that the way to know God is by prayer, or study, or meditation—and don't get me wrong, these are all wonderful supplements that will enhance our spiritual lives, but the scriptures say that the most basic way

to know God is by loving people and being loved by people.

Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can't know him if you don't love.

No one has seen God, ever. But if we love one another, God dwells deeply within us, and his love becomes complete in us.

Belief is not a requisite for understanding the meaning of life. Only love is. Many of us know God far better than we may think we do. Each time we give or receive love, God is there at work in both the giver and the recipient. That thing that binds us to one another. That thing that makes us hurt for one another. That thing that makes us laugh with each other. Those experiences are God at work in the world.

Psychics promise fortune telling.
Churches promise meaning and
purpose.

But do they deliver? Really?

I don't know about psychics. Maybe some day I'll give it a try. Until then, for now, as it pertains to church, I can say "Yes. Many of them deliver on their promise." And I'd like to think that we're one of them. But it's not because of a program or a seminar or a service that we offer to people. It just happens along the way gradually, almost as if by accident. As we keep showing up and leaning into it, our lives compound with more and more hope and we begin to see the meaning of it all.

I can't really tell you the moment when it happened for me. It just happened, and it keeps happening as I spend my life loving people and being loved by people.

CONTACT

One of the greatest thinkers of our time, the astronomer, cosmologist, and astrophysicist, Carl Sagan wrote something that continues to astound me as much today as it did when I first read it. I admire this man and his writing so much that I even named my daughter after a of the character in one of his books.

In his book, “Contact” there’s a character named Ellie Arroway. And Ellie is selected by the government to travel through a wormhole to a planet in the constellation Lyra where she meets an advanced civilization of beings who have been living for billions of years. And the conversation between her and one of the beings still gives me chills each time I read it.

The being says to her, speaking of Earthlings.

“You're an interesting species. An interesting mix. You're capable of such beautiful dreams, and such horrible nightmares. You feel so lost, so cut off, so alone, only you're not. See, in all our searching, the only thing we've found that makes the emptiness bearable, is each other.”

— Carl Sagan, “Contact”

The meaning of life— to love and be loved.

That’s what this whole thing is all about.