

Living Boldly  
Luke 6:17-26, Colossians 3:1-4  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
March 26, 2006  
Lenten Series #4: By what values shall I live?  
Pastor Dave Carver

In a chapter entitled, “Purchased Experiences Don’t Count”, Elvissa leans in to the four young adults around her and says,

I want you to tell me something first: after you’re dead and buried and floating around whatever place we go to, what’s going to be your best memory of earth?...What one moment for you defines what it’s like to be alive on this planet? What’s your *takeaway*?...Fake yuppie experiences that you had to spend money on, like white water rafting or elephant rides in Thailand don’t count. I want to hear some small moment from your life that *proves you’re really alive*.<sup>1</sup>

The book is entitled *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. It purports to be the story of a group of young adult friends who are emblematic of life in today’s America. According to the book’s jacket, “Andy, Dag, and Claire are underemployed, overeducated, intensely private, and unpredictable. Like the group they mirror, they have nowhere to direct their anger, no one to assuage their fears, and no culture to replace their anomie.”

I’m not talking about this book because I think it’s the next Great American Novel (technically, this would be impossible since the author is Canadian). Nor do I bring it up because I wanted to use the word “anomie” in a sentence for the first time in my life (it means “a feeling of alienation from society caused by the perceived absence of a supporting social or moral framework”). I brought this book to your attention because you know Andy, Dag, and Claire. You know people whose lives are characterized by a sense of meaninglessness and despair and who, although they should have a lot for which to live, find themselves feeling as though there is no point to life, and wondering, maybe, if they really are alive right now.

Wow, is that depressing! That’s heavy for a Sunday morning at 11:30. What do we do with that? What do we do with a culture that seems in many ways characterized by anomie (there, I did it again! Twice in a single page!)? Look, we’re in church, we know what the right answer is, right? To whom do we turn when we’re feeling sad or lonely or...anomic? Ummmm....*Jesus?*

Here he is in Luke’s gospel...he’s just finished a sort of personal retreat and then has called the twelve disciples. He gathers these twelve and a group of other followers and sits amongst a huge crowd of people and begins to teach. And what does he give them? Well, if you were raised in the church, you recognize this as Luke’s version of the Beatitudes. Jesus delivers a tightly constructed pronouncement of four blessings and four woes. You heard them: did you notice the parallelism? Blessed are the poor, woe to the rich; blessed are the hungry, woe to the full; blessed are the weepers, woe to the laughers; blessed are the scorned, woe to the beloved...”

You know, you can always count on Jesus. Whenever people are confused, he just tells it straight out, no guesswork involved...Wait a second, here. There’s something missing in this little sermon of Jesus’. There are no imperatives – nothing for us to do! In Deuteronomy 11, the nation of Israel is given a choice between blessing and woe, but at least in the Old Testament there’s a behavior that is commended. In other words, if you want to be blessed – do this. If you want to be cursed – do the other thing. But here in Luke, there is no advice on how to get in on the blessings or

---

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (St. Martin’s Press, 1991), p. 91.

how to avoid the curses. There are no suggestions on how to reach out and grab our best lives now...There's just a simple proclamation: for this group: good news! For these other folks: bad news.

Unless...unless it's possible that Jesus is saying to the people who are most eager to follow him – to the twelve who would leave everything for him and eventually even die for him...unless Jesus is saying something like, “You know, don't you, that if you follow me, if you live like me, if you act like me...then you'll be living upside-down in the world. If you pay attention to the things that I'm going to be teaching you and try to live them out, you're not going to fit into your culture very well at all...” Could that be it? Jesus was pretty well known for asking tougher questions than he answered...

So far this Lent, we've explored three of what theologian and scholar Marva Dawn<sup>2</sup> has labeled the “seven needs of our being”: the need to know “who am I?”, the need to answer “how does it all fit together?”, and the need to spell out “to whom do I belong? What can I trust?” In doing so, we've talked about the fact that we derive our identity from being children of God; that we can live confidently because we know that God has a story and we fit into it; and we can trust God because of his care for us. Today, we look at the need to answer the question, “How should I live? What are my values?”

I have to confess that I get a little queasy when someone talks about values. My new friend Karen asked me the other day, “What are your values, Dave?” and I started to laugh, because for me, that brings up memories of High School Youth Group, where many of the lessons were so-called “values clarification exercises”. We'd sit around and look at this very book and ask, “are you more like a willow or an oak? A cello or a trumpet?” or “Are you more apt to admire a leader or a poet? Wisdom or honor?” or finally, “Which is more important to the church: how much I give or how much I do?” What I found with that book was that more often than not, our lessons were shared ignorance. We didn't have any grounding at all – how could I talk about values? I didn't learn much about following Jesus in those discussions. I didn't learn much about values.

Our values are the core beliefs that undergird our decisions. A value is a thing that you know to be true – a principle on which you can make a stand when you are faced with a decision. What are your values? Remember Andy, Dag, and Claire? Listen to this reflection that Andy gives while visiting his family's home one Christmas:

The phone is no friend; Portland is Deadsville at the moment. My friends are all either married, boring, and depressed; single, bored, and depressed; or moved out of town to avoid boredom and depression. And some of them have bought houses, which has to be the kiss of death, personality-wise. When someone tells you they've just bought a house, they might as well tell you that no longer have a personality. You can immediately assume many things: that they're locked into jobs they hate, that they're broke; that they spend every night watching videos; that they're fifteen pounds overweight; that they no longer listen to new ideas. It's profoundly depressing. And the *worst* part of it is that people in their houses don't even *like* where they're living. What few happy moments they possess are those gleaned from dreams of *upgrading*.<sup>3</sup>

We could say that Andy is whining, or that he is being arrogant, or that he's just a fictional character in an unheralded novel. And all of that may be true. But he does provide, for me at any rate, an incisive critique of what it's like to live in our part of planet earth at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a vivid and alarming cry for our lives to consist of something more than what we have.

---

<sup>2</sup> *A Royal “Waste” of Time* (Eerdmans 1999), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Coupland, p. 143.

What are our values? Where do we go to learn how to live? Can't Jesus tell us anything? Listen to the reading from Luke again, this time from Eugene Peterson's translation:

You're blessed when you've lost it all. God's kingdom is there for the finding.

You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry. Then you're ready for a Messianic meal.

You're blessed when the tears flow freely. Joy comes with the morning.

Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and that person is uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens...for even though they don't like it, I do...

But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you'll ever get.

And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself. Your *self* will not satisfy you for long.

And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games. There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it.

There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests – look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular. (Luke 6, *The Message*)

Can you see where that connects? Can you see how that word might be a good, a true, an encouraging word to someone like Andy or Dag or Claire? I think that the apostle Paul could see that when he wrote to the Colossians. Paul, who had joined those early followers of Jesus and who had had his own life turned upside down, came to see that the only worthwhile ultimate, core value in life is the eternal presence of Jesus Christ. Because I can bank on the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, I can know that my life, my decisions, my choices have meaning insofar as they are based on God as the center of my life.

Paul wrote to the Colossians – and to us – that upside down can be – and will be – rightside up. There is no need to be held hostage to the powers of our culture and we are, in fact, free to live as followers of Christ. We can escape the enslavement to acquisitiveness and possessions that Andy and his friends lampoon. We are freed from an entanglement of debt that comes when we try to buy our life's meaning. We have no fear of aging into irrelevance, even in a world that says you can never be too rich, too thin, or too young.

Why are we free to do this, Paul? Because our old lives are dead. We are called to look up to the newness of what Jesus is making us to be.

So where is the imperative? How shall we live?

We live by looking for Jesus. Where is he moving? Can we catch a glimpse of where Jesus is already active in the world today and sidle over to him and try to catch up with him? Where is he? According to Luke, he's with the poor, the hungry, the grieving, and the persecuted. If we say we want to follow him, and if we say that he has in fact freed us to follow him, then we are bound to see him moving in those places and calling us to join him there. If someone were to ask you Elvissa's question: what is your takeaway moment – one small moment that proves you are really alive?, what would you say? For many of you, you might say "a mission trip". You've been to West Virginia or Malawi or the Food Pantry, and you've seen Jesus there. You've set everything aside for a week or two, and in that time you have tried hard to live like Jesus...and then you've come home.

Those who have tried to follow Jesus know that living like him brings power to love like him. And loving like him fashions us into a shape that makes us all the more able to line up with God's purposes for our lives. How do we live? Boldly and recklessly in the love of Jesus Christ. Not because it's some thrill ride like skydiving or white-water-rafting, but because it's the only way to find ourselves in the midst of those whom Jesus called most precious. Can you live like every day is a mission trip? Not because you're far from home, and not because you need a passport, but because Jesus is calling you to see the poor, the hungry, the grieving, and the persecuted all the time. Can you do that? That's life. That's living. Amen.