

Love is Our Greatest Purpose

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Hearing Andy Stanley's story about the car reminds me of my a similar story that happened to me and my friend Damien. It was shortly after the two of us had graduated from high school. It was particularly hot that summer and the temperatures in mid-June were getting higher and higher. Damien had had his graduation party before I had, so he was flush with cash. We decided that he had just a little too much cash on him at the time, so he needed to get rid of some of it. What better way to do so than a road trip to the big city. Now in southeast Michigan, what we meant by the big city was Toledo Ohio! He and I would often take day trips to Toledo mostly to hang out at the mall or catch a movie that wasn't playing in the small town we lived in.

So the week after graduation we got into his blue Chevy that had literally only been driven by a little old lady going to church. It was old but with good mileage. We take a series of back roads and finally get onto the interstate. We were on the highway about twenty minutes when I noticed that white smoke was coming out from under the hood of the

car. I heard a strange noise like a click clack sound. We pulled over and of course the white smoke started billowing out from under the hood. Neither of us were particularly handy with cars. Actually that is an understatement—we were both woefully ignorant of how to fix cars. There we were, stuck out by the side of the road. Our parents knew we were going on this trip so they wouldn't be expecting us home for a long long time.

Now kids this was before the days of cell phones. We were on the outskirts of town near the suburbs of Toledo. We thought perhaps we could walk to the next exit and find a gas station where we could use a cell phone and have someone pick us up. Just as we were about to set out, a van pulled up. Inside was a husband and wife who offered to give us a ride. In our hour of desperation we said yes. I noticed that inside the van was a lot of Christian fundamentalist literature. I waited for the speech about “Having found Jesus as my Lord and Savior yet” but it never came. It turns out that these two were honest to goodness Good Samaritans who were helping out a traveler in need.

They drove us to the next exit and the nearest gas station. I called my Dad at work. Somehow he got off early and found us and the car. We had it towed to the gas station to find the radiator shot. Damien had to have the car towed all the way home—so much for his graduation money. He later confessed to me that as we were driving down the interstate he had noticed that the dashboard light had come on indicating

that the engine was overheating. He didn't think too much of it until the white smoke appeared. The click clack sound that I heard turned out to be the walls of the cylinders warping under the hot sun, and the pistons subsequently slamming into what was no longer a smooth housing. Another half mile and the engine in his car would have either caught fire or fused together to make a very fancy boat anchor. Actually there are a lot of stories about Damien and his misadventures with cars but I will save those for another day.

Both of these stories demonstrate a principle that Andy Stanley calls "The Principle of the Path." We are all on a path of some kind, he says. The path you are on determines where you will wind up. If you keep going down a stretch of road that says, "Road Closed" you could very well end up in a swamp. Usually there are signs along the way that give you a clue as to what road you are on. So if you are on a path in life where you are spending more than you earn; your destination will probably be a pretty bad financial place. If you smoke or don't exercise regularly; the path is health problems down the road. If you are working all of the time and not putting in time with your partner or family; you will likely end up with problems in your marriage or family down the road.

Seen objectively we can all look back and understand this Principle of the Path rationally. Of course you turn back when the sign says "Road Closed." When that little light with the engine comes on in your

car, you pull over immediately. That is the rational thing to do. But all too often we don't live according to the dictates of reason. Instead of following the reasonable course, we choose happiness now over happiness later. "It would be inconvenient to stop or turn around." We think to ourselves. Why be late to a fun day in Toledo or miss curfew and be grounded?

Being a Christian minister, Stanley reminds us of Proverbs 27:12 "The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it." Notice that in both stories there are signs saying "Hey wait! Look out here!" And in both cases they are ignored. The prudent see signs and take action accordingly. The simple, or perhaps the naïve, see signs and keep going down the road they are on even when it leads to a place they very much don't want to be.

Of course the Principle of the Path doesn't have to be only negative. We can be going down a path that leads to good things; places we want to end up. Again we can see signs for this good path and act accordingly when we see them. The wise see and act. The taking action part is the key. You either paid that bill or you didn't. You either went to the gym or you didn't. Simply having the intention to be on a different path isn't enough. It might be a good start to motivate you, but actions are what make a difference.

One of the morning stations I flip through during my morning routine is a sports talk radio program. It is about all that seems to be on early in the morning when I am getting myself ready before the kids wake up. On this particular day one of the co-hosts was out and filling in for him was Herm Edwards, a former NFL football coach. And the fellow with him described the scene. The regular guy rolled into work at the usual time; about 5 AM. There he found that coach Herm Edwards had already been to the gym next door, showered, dressed, and was ready to go by the time the other fellow had walked in the door.

Herm Edwards is retired from coaching now, but does a lot of analysis work. He is probably in his early sixties. So he asked Edwards about this. He was impressed. Edwards said simply, “We are what we do every day. I used to tell my players that; your habits make you who you are.” That is the principle of the path—the signs that tell you which path you are on are the same as the actions you take every day.

This applies to churches too. Churches, like individuals, are on a path, and the destination of that path is determined by what we do every day, or at least every week. My good friend Rev. David Owen-O’Quill has a great way of talking about mission and vision. It is a passion for him in his ministry. He says simply that the church’s vision is where we want to be. It is our intended destination. The trick is to get from here to there. We want to be over there, but we find ourselves here. Obviously one needs a vision otherwise you can’t even describe what

“over there” looks like. If we can’t all agree on what “over there” is, then we have no hope of ever getting there. We would get pulled into a thousand different directions. The exercise the Board lead this year called Mission Possible was a process whereby we articulate for ourselves where we want to end up. It is not the same as being there or even getting there. But painting a picture of where we intend to go is a vitally important first step toward getting there.

To get from where we are to where we want to be our actions every day or every week need to be consistent with the destination we want to arrive at. As the responsive reading for today indicated “The Way leads on.” We may wish to rest and wait, but once we know where we are going we must be about the business of getting there. The Board is nearly finished with the Mission Possible work. But one piece of that vision, that destination we intend to arrive at, is expressed in words we tell ourselves every week. They are right there in our Unison Affirmation: “Love is our greatest purpose.” So if the destination we want to arrive at is love, then what do we need to be doing every day or every week? Love. It is both the path and the arrival point. Love is both the Ends and the Means to getting there.

Remember the signs along the way that point to which path we are on are our actions—not just pretty words recited during worship. That may be the starting point but it is neither the ending point nor even the path itself. The path itself is action. It is the habits of Love that we do

all of the time. Another thing my friend Dave likes to say about vision is that you have to be able to fail at it. In other words you need strong action oriented verbs. “Being a beacon of liberal religion,” is not a mission. You can’t really fail at that so long as you keep the doors open. Vision demands that we be proactive in actually doing something. It requires a path.

My favorite sign that we as a church are on the path of love came this past winter during the Martin Luther King day of service. I was sitting next to a young woman who was from the University of Delaware. This was obvious by the big sweater she wore with her sorority’s Greek letters emblazoned across the front. She and two of her sorority sisters had come all the way from Newark because they had read about the Martin Luther King day of service in the newspaper. Actually they probably read about it online knowing how college kids consume news these days. At any rate there she was.

We were sitting next to each other cutting two pieces of cloth into small strips. About a dozen or so people were doing this, we were cutting the edges three or four inches in so that by the time we were done these two pieces of cloth lay on top of each other and had a kind of fringe around the edge. One of the older kids in the RE program came up and corrected us. We were making our strips too wide—they needed to be narrower. When we had finished everyone pulled the two pieces of cloth tightly together and tied all of the “threads” that we had just

made. The result was a small, but attractive looking blanket that could hold an infant. It was going to be given to parents to keep their children warm.

As we were finishing up, I started chatting with Ginny Marano, the Executive Director of the local YWCA, and she invited me to go to attend a lecture at Del Tech by the noted speaker Tim Wise. I had read a book by Wise a year or two earlier it having been a gift from one of our members. So I was looking forward to it.

The auditorium was packed full of students, and not a few members of First Unitarian Church. Wise gave a rousing speech that energized the crowd. Hopefully he changed a few minds that morning, but I couldn't help but get the impression that everyone was already there. It felt like he was leading a tent revival only to find that everyone had already been converted! That isn't a bad thing of course—getting energized for the work of fighting racism is a necessary thing. I left his speech thinking about the college kids that had come to our church and had made a blanket for a person they would never see, but who desperately needed what they had done. That is a very different way to spend your time than going to parties and studying in the library. I wondered if they had ever done anything like that before. I am so grateful that the kids that go to our CYRE program have exposure to things like the day of service, so that they don't have to wait until they are in college to start doing these acts of love.

And I thought about the mother who received this mysterious blanket. What did it mean to her? That she could now keep her child warm and close to her body thanks to this small act. It was a small act—we should have no delusions of grandeur here. No system of oppression or poverty had been taken down as a result. When we use the term “Small action” instead of bemoaning the word “small” we should celebrate the word “action.” Any action, no matter how small, makes some kind of difference to someone. Like the proverbial starfish being thrown back into the ocean, it matters to that one.

If love is our greatest purpose than love needs to become our habit; the thing we do all the time. We should be proactive with these acts of love—I hope to see us do more things like the Martin Luther Day of service. It is something that everyone, all generations, can hook into at any level we feel works for us. All of the great social activists started somewhere. They didn’t just spring from the forehead of Zeus ready to take on the system. They were nurtured and they were open to learning and they had the opportunity to do these small acts of love. That is what our church should be providing people, because that is how we grow committed social justice folks. By what we do every day.

Love is not something we can hoard like you see on those reality TV shows. People get obsessed with their “stuff” in a crazy way and can never let go of anything, not even their garbage. Of course it piles up and piles up. We cannot be a hoarder for love. Love is something

that we have to give away all of the time. Acts of love, great or small, is what makes a church a church. It is what makes us unique from all other social groups. That commitment to love not only ourselves, to not just get our spiritual goodies and go home, but to direct that love outward to be committed to the world out there—that is truly our greatest purpose.

May we walk that path well and faithfully. May we always have the clarity and the courage to take the next step. Amen Blessed Be.