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*Living with Purpose – The Discipline of Submission*  
Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

The summer of my junior year in college carried me to the inner city of New York City. My assignment was to do youth ministry at the Polish Baptist Church in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. My work was not so much with the church itself, whose services were in the Polish language, but with the children and youth in that two-block area.

Greenpoint Brooklyn street ministry was not my first choice of thirteen student assignments to be made; it was actually my last, just under working in the desert on an Oklahoma Native American reservation. My first choice, listed on my application, was an assignment to Austria. Granted, the beauty of the country and the chance to spend three months in Europe had its pull. Seven students would be assigned to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Too close to home, though 10-weeks of beach ministry (whatever that might be) did have a certain appeal. The Austrian assignment required German-language background, and I had had two years of German at that point.

The placement committee I met with in Columbia, South Carolina, asked a number of questions during my interview. I remember only two. “German beer is served frequently as water in Austria. Will you have a problem with that?” “I don’t think so,” I responded. The second question was, “Would you be willing to go wherever we need you the most?” With a pause, I responded, “I will.”

When my letter of placement arrived a couple of weeks later at Furman, my destination was New York City. I was greatly disappointed, not because of anything against New York City. I loved the city. My graduating high school class spent part of a week there. My heart and mind were set on the Alps and Austria. I was literally nauseated when I read the letter.

“The committee has made a mistake,” I thought to myself.

I felt drawn to Austria. Surely, the mistake will become evident before the June departure. However, I had submitted myself to the wisdom and needs of the committee, and I *would* go wherever I was most needed for the summer.

My first week felt like a waste of time. I lived with the Reverend John Kasa and his family who were recent immigrants from Poland. I worked alone with several age groups of children, doing a solo-type of vacation Bible school, the whole time thinking I would have been contributing more at a Boys Camp in the Appalachian Mountains. I had conveyed such in a letter to the chaplain at my college. He wrote back reminding me that what I do for the least, I am doing for God. Those words of direction caused me to look at Robbie and the other young kids differently. I began looking for other ways to use my time. After my hours at the Polish Baptist Church, I went into Manhattan most days. I met Herb Maynard, the Director of the Bowery Street Mission. He invited me to volunteer after hours. I preached on numerous occasions and began learning about addiction problems and street ministry. Herb offered to help me take two different gangs on camping trips. I met additional kids in the Puerto Rican section of Bowery Street. I took them to museums and Central Park on Saturdays. In the midst of what started as a wasted summer, I began to find meaning. The menial work I was assigned to do began to have purpose. It was complimented with exploring a new, wonderful city on a budget of \$200 for the entire summer. The Staten Island Ferry became my altar (for the price of a nickel), giving me perspective about my experiences and allowing me to see the city from a distance. Obviously, working the summer for free and being given \$200 as added "living expenses" for the entire ten weeks, I saw New York from the bottom up.

The discipline of submission involves yielding, accepting, and honoring. As Richard Foster would say of all the spiritual disciplines, it puts us in a position (physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually) to encounter those things that are larger than ourselves...to become a part of issues that are far more important than we by ourselves...to experience purpose in living.

The discipline of submission is a *means* to a more important experience. It is not an end in itself. Jesus would be quick to say that following Torah (the laws of the Jewish people) is not an end in itself. To do so mechanically for the sole purpose of following the letter of the law, is to become filled with pride and arrogance. "They have their reward." To touch the leper, to be a good Samaritan,

to carry the Roman soldier's things for two miles rather than the required Roman mile is to go beyond the law and experience a deeper purpose in life.

Both texts for today—the letter to the Hebrews and the Gospel of John—speak of Jesus' submission to a higher purpose than his own agenda. Hebrews says that because of Jesus' "reverent submission" to the Way of God, despite his "loud cries and tears" for another way, he (Jesus) has been designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek is a figure from the Hebrew Bible, referred to only twice—once in Genesis (14:18) and once in the Psalms (110:4). Literally meaning "the King of Righteousness," he gave bread and wine to Abram along with his blessing, then gave Abram a tenth of everything he owned.

The Gospel of John also speaks of Jesus' submission to a higher calling. With John's gospel, you have to remember that it was written sixty to seventy years after Jesus' death and is not an eye-witness of Jesus' life. (None of the gospels are.) John is attempting to interpret the events in the life of Jesus and the importance of Jesus' life. The gospel has Jesus saying,

*"...my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Abba, save me from this hour?' No it is for this reason that I have come to this hour."*

Coupled with that paragraph are Jesus' words: "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, Abba will honor." Submission is included in the way of following Jesus. It means *choosing* not to be right all the time. It means *choosing* not to get your way all the time.

One of my clinical supervisors used to say, "If your goal is to prove that you are right, you may win your argument, but lose the relationship." People with this freedom—this practice or discipline—often live in a state of fuming and fussing, because they always have to get their way. Leo Tolstoy once said, "Happiness does not depend on outward things, but on the way we see them." Through the practice of submission, we experience the freedom of valuing other people.

Two Thursday evenings from now, we will gather for the Maundy Thursday service of Holy Week. The term "Maundy" comes from the Latin

version of John 13:34: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you.” A “mandate” for Jesus-followers. *Maundy Thursday*. His words are an explanation for why he washed his disciples’ feet. Only John’s Gospel tells the story of “foot washing.” While it is a service to his disciples, it is a beautiful picture of submission to them. Would Jesus have liked having his own feet washed? Sure. Would he have liked having one or two of his disciples take the role of host or a “servant” to the host? Of course. But, his washing their feet—not to make a point, but to truly honor them—was a practice and discipline of submission to them. It conveyed respect, honor, appreciation, and love.

You may be asking, “Aren’t there times when being submissive is the wrong thing to do,” and my quick answer is, “Sure.” When submission becomes destructive or dysfunctional it should be avoided. Submission should always be a choice for a higher value and virtuous purpose.

In her new book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Taylor tells of her struggle as a young adult with what she is to do with her life. In the opening lines of that chapter she says:

*In my life so far, I have been a babysitter, an Avon lady, a cashier, a cheese-packer, a horseback riding instructor, a nursing unit clerk, a cocktail waitress, a secretary, a newspaper reporter, an editor, a fund-raiser, a special-events coordinator, a teacher of creative writing, a hospital chaplain, a pastor, a preacher, and a college professor — and those are just the jobs that I have been paid for.*

*I still have not given up on becoming a chef, a jewelry maker, a travel writer, a zookeeper, a chambermaid, a bookstore manager, or — the most secret, thrilling vocational desire of all — a member of the French Canadian traveling circus Cirque du Soleil.<sup>1</sup>*

She goes on to tell how she had grown up to believe that there was *one* thing she was to do in life. While in seminary, she discovered an old fire escape, on the deserted building next door to the Divinity School, that became her place of prayer and contemplation. One night while asking God her oft repeated question, “What am I to do with my life?” she heard an answer. “Anything that pleases you.”

“What kind of answer is that?” she said.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (New York, HaperCollins: 2009), 107-108.

The voice in her head said again, “Do anything that pleases you...and belong to me.”<sup>2</sup>

It is both the first and last parts of “God’s voice” through the deep musings of her mind that are important—*anything that pleases you and belong to me*.

Purpose in life may or may not be connected to what you get paid to do. Purpose, first and foremost, is found in submission to the higher good of life—to God, who is in all things. And, purpose in life is found in doing those things that ultimately bring pleasure. As you struggle to refine your own search for meaning and purpose, you will discover it in the ways set forth by Jesus—being fully human and fully alive.

## **Prayer**

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 110.

**Hebrews 5:5-10**

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek."

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

**John 12:20-33**

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say-"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.