



Title: "The Best Parts of You, #2: Us"

Date: October 18, 2015

Scripture: Matthew 28:16-20

Summary: The key factor in a quality life is meaning, living a life that matters. At this church, you become connected with things that matter and can accomplish things that matter.

What makes some stuff matter to us? Anybody can observe that we're not driven to make life easy for ourselves; we want the things we do to matter. Small acts of meaning change everything. Involving yourself in Facebook or Twitter is completely voluntary. Imagine Facebook and Twitter were designed to allow posts but nobody would ever see. Who would ever bother? Even small amounts of meaning make a huge difference.

Some researchers wanted to know how much meaning made how much difference. They used Bionicles (*slide #1*), which are kids' toys like Transformers. They're made from about 40 pieces; it takes a couple minutes to build them.

Participants were asked to build a Bionicle. "We'll pay you \$3.00 to build this one. You in?" If they said yes, they built it and were paid. Then they were invited to build the next one for \$2.70. (*slide # 2*) And when they finished that one, the next one for \$2.40, and so on.

At what point would they decide to stop building Bionicles? Not worth the effort.

Okay, that was the first group. A different group was given the same challenge—build a Bionicle for a diminishing payment. But this time there was a catch: as they were building the first Bionicle, the leaders were taking the first one apart and putting the original pieces back into the box. Right in front of them.

And when they finished the second one, they were asked, "Would you like to build a third one? If they said yes, they were given the first one, the one they had built before and had been taken apart. So they went back and forth on the same two Bionicles until they basically had had enough and quit.

The experiment was trying to determine that if what you're building is going to be short-lived and destroyed in front of your eyes, would it make any difference to you? Turns out it did. The first people in the first group built an average of eleven; the group who watched their Bionicles being destroyed—they only built seven. That is more than statistically significant—that second group only did about half as much work.

It isn't the paycheck. It's the meaning. We'll push ourselves, work hard, make sacrifices—if what we're doing makes a difference. If what we do matters, we live in a different world from it's useless.

That's what I meant when I said that these sermons in October were among the most important ones I'll ever preach. They can move you away from empty weeks filled with stuff that just keeps you busy into a sense that what you're doing matters, makes a contribution. Because of you, the world is a better place.

I'm inviting you to strengthen your role in Pleasant Hill Church and what is done here. Through this church, God is touching lives and changing our world. You cannot find a higher meaning than that. At the end of a day or week, what can you say more significant than "the love of God increased in someone today, and I played a part." Some days, as a bonus, you even get to say, "the love of God increased in (insert your own name here) today." It doesn't get any better than that.

I'll tell a story that shows the differences I'm talking about.

The first thing Jack did after losing his wife of 52 years was howl at the moon, day and night. Most of us do that for awhile when our heart gets ripped out, then we begin to get better. Jack realized he needed some help.

So he came here to PHPC—stumbled here, actually, eyes red with weeping, days empty with sitting at home alone—stumbled here because in the recesses of his memory he recalled raising his sons in a church. He remembered the values and strength he picked up there, the friends he made there, and the excellent fried chicken available at the covered-dish dinners.

He was so tired of sitting around the house alone all day, doing nothing but miss his wife and procrastinate the task of cleaning out her closet. "Church was good for my boys; Church might be good for me," he thought. So the next Sunday he drove to worship at Pleasant Hill.

He didn't make it through the first hymn. "It's a good thing I'm old-fashioned and carry a handkerchief," he thought, wiping his eyes, the corners of his mouth, his nose, and everywhere else that grief found a place to escape.

The next Sunday he returned and stayed for all of worship plus a cup of coffee afterwards. He spoke with the people who introduced themselves, then before long he told his story to the ones who asked.

I would say Jack changed immediately, but he didn't. Resurrection is always erratic at first. Life returns in fits and starts and Jack's return to life was bathed in tears. But he did return to life. Or life returned to him, because it wasn't anything he accomplished, it was a gift. And he knew it was a gift from God, wrapped in the package of people who were this church.

He started attending a Sunday School Class, then a Bible Study that met during the week. Him—crusty old Jack Dubs! He knew his questions drove the teachers crazy sometimes, but that was part of the fun. He figured he should pitch in somehow, so he volunteered to help count the offerings one Sunday a month, and then he helped out wherever he was needed.

Not that he led the Youth Group up Stone Mountain or ran in the Stop Hunger 5K. His knees were so bad he could hardly make it down the aisle. “I walk like a duck,” he admitted once when he arrived at the communion table. “Do you serve ducks here?” Still he stubbornly refused to use the walker his doctor recommended. “I can stand on my own two feet,” he insisted, and everybody knew he wasn’t just speaking of walking.

During their third year of sitting near each other in Sunday School, someone gave Jack a cane. “It’s for style, Jack,” he explained. “Not that you need it at all.” Jack accepted the cane and, to everyone’s surprise, he began to use it. “It’s good to have support when I need it,” he explained. Everybody knew he wasn’t just speaking of walking.

Jack continued to help count the offerings, but he also kept busy by giving Andy a hard time, complaining that the hearing devices in the sanctuary didn’t work, and reminding Hyoun Joo that he liked her piano playing more than her organ playing. Though he never acknowledged it, his major function here was to serve as a model for how an 88-year-old with bad knees and bad hearing remains full of life.

He lived his life, right up until he was taken to Intensive Care after a fall, where he died a week later. Before his funeral, his sons asked that the casket lid be opened for a few minutes. They placed Jack’s cane, the gift from his church friend, at his side. “We had given him half a dozen canes,” they said, “but he refused to use them. He leaned on you folks so much during these last years, we knew he would want this one with him.”

You. You did that. You were the tools God used to put an eighty-something year old life back together. You, even if you never met Jack personally. Everything that happens in this church happens as a result of the financial contributions that you give here. You contribute, and you become part of every good and meaningful thing that happens here.

This church doesn’t often make headlines; we seldom generate fireworks displays. This church changes lives. Through the Spirit of Christ that flows through these people and these buildings and these worship services and these programs, life flows into hearts of people. Sometimes people rise from the dead. If someone asks what you’ve done lately, you tell them, “Oh, raised the dead, restored sight to the blind, turned grieving into dancing, turned wails of sorrow into song.” If you grow discouraged and feel that you’re mostly assembling parts that come apart before tomorrow, take courage that here you are bringing life into people.

Here, lives are not only restored and reformed, they are formed. We aren't limited to the elderly or those who have endured the trauma of loss. Christ does his best work here as young lives are molded into men and women of God.

Jack Dubs played a part in that. (This part is rich with good theology.) At his weakest moment, Jack Dubs helped foster a young person's faith and character. Let's give her the opportunity to tell about that.

Courtney Henry, 17, is a senior at Peachtree Ridge High School. She serves as an officer in the church (Presbyterian officers are called elders). Courtney, come join me up here and let's talk.

You met Jack Dubs only once, but you remember it. Tell us about it.

CH: *On a hospital visit. You asked me to go with you to visit him one afternoon in Gwinnett Medical Center Duluth. He'd fallen a few days earlier and had been in ICU since then.*

DF: Why did I invite you?

CH: *Describe internship. I'll ask follow-up questions about this to make it flow. This doesn't have to be a speech, we can interact several times.*

DF: Had you visited many people in hospitals before?

CH:

DF: I'm going to ask you questions on two basic subjects: 1) described what happened. How did he look? How he responded? Was he conscious, alert, cognizant? Do you remember if we prayed and if he reacted? 2) How did you feel during the visit and afterwards. I remember that when we returned to the church you wept. Can you tell about the tears. (You don't have to say specifically that you cried if you don't wish to, just describe the feelings/thoughts.)

DF : The next time you saw Jack was about ten days later...

CH. *Yes. At his funeral here in this sanctuary. I was serving as a member of the host team to take care of the needs of the family that afternoon and Linda Murphy recommended that I sit in here and observe during the service. I heard laughter...etc.*

DF After my brother's funeral last week, I noticed that some of my 20-something nieces were experiencing their first funeral. You're acquiring some life experiences way ahead of the curve of a lot of young adults. How has it affected you or your faith?

CH. *?Death is a little less scary because it's not so unknown.?*

?I realize the faith traditions and customs at the end of life actually do help bring comfort.?

A couple possible answers for you to consider. But you say what's real for you.

DF Thanks, Courtney.

An old man buried with a new cane, a high schooler maturing into a woman of faith: these are two examples of what you accomplish when you give here, when you worship and join your voice in song and prayer, when you offer your time and service, and when you pledge and contribute financially.

How much should you give? That's up to you, of course. I want to suggest three possibilities for you to consider, three levels of giving:

1. Gotta Have It. This is what we need to offer a basic, healthy church. Give the same as you gave last year. We finished 2014 with a \$40,000 deficit, but we cut some costs and programs (mostly personnel costs) and so far in 2015 we're meeting expenses and good things are happening. Keep it up.
2. Really Want It—our current contributions plus \$40,000. Working part-time, Cynthia, our interim Christian Educator is leading us through the transition, and we've kept our energy for spiritual growth. We've also identified areas we want to explore and be on the growing edge. We want to restore a full-time Associate Pastor position who specializes in nurturing faith.

Our Search Team believes that Middle School is an age when youth are the most vulnerable and also the most fertile for establishing a life of faith. So they've created a position description that combines overall-education expertise with a heart for Middle-Schoolers. Among Presbyterians, there are such people! And our search team is salivating with excitement over the possibilities!

We're not asking you to salivate. (Drooling is not your best look.) We're asking you to commit more than this past year, enough to reach a \$40,000 increase. And we'll confidently move towards our Gotta Have It Goal.

3. Wildest dream. What if God's Spirit blew through us and we all stepped up to a giving level that would make God proud? Here's my Wildest Dream goal.

The response to our Ethics in Health Care Evenings this month has been amazing. How do I deal with medical issues and how do I care for my parents and how do I get access to medical resources? You are hungry for knowledge. Alongside raising our children well, this may be the number one subject on our minds. Partnering with Gwinnett Medical, we've found extraordinary experts on these things.

Wildest dream? Let's place one of those experts in residence here at Pleasant Hill Church. A Parish Nurse who knows how to interpret information we receive from our physicians, who can actually explain insurance coverage, and who can connect members of our community without healthcare to services that are available for them. I'm guessing \$60,000 above our Really Want It goal would add such a person to our staff, present at every one of our Senior Group lunches, available by phone and email to respond to your questions, resourcing sleep-deprived young moms and dads about child care and self care.

Your decision to commit to financial support. Your pledge to participate. Your opening to a new, larger arena of things that matter in your life. You, joining with God to bring life to this world.

Make a pledge. Complete a card. Put it in the covered box. Place your name on the tree of healing. Enjoy what it means to you.