

Leading Causes of Life
3) We Do, We Live: Agency
John 15:14-16; James 1:19-25
September 13, 2009

Yesterday we had a youthful, strong, and energetic work crew of about 20 people here on the church campus. It was a creek cleanup day, in spite of the thunder, lightning, and raindrops! You can see the piles of concrete and other debris pulled from the creek, along with tree trimmings and trash. We received a mandate from the city to clean up the creek. I issued the call for action and those who were able responded in fine fashion. That's agency, the human capacity to act. Those who participated feel a great sense of accomplishment, having met an expressed need. Agency is one of the leading causes of life.

We are in the midst of a series called the *Leading Causes of Life*. We often hear about the leading causes of death, but how often have we considered those forces that really enable us to thrive in life. Two weeks ago we considered the importance of connection, both a spiritual connection to God and social connections to other human beings who support and challenge us. We gather as a community of faith to nurture our need for connection, because in relationship our lives are fed. Last Sunday we considered the importance of coherence, of a purpose that gives direction and meaning to our lives. I invited you to write a six-word mission statement and share it on the graffiti wall in the Fellowship Hall. It's not too late to add yours to the wall!

Anchored by a sense of purpose and meaning, we launch into the third leading cause of life, agency or action. Agency "turns abstract nouns into verbs. Agency turns connection into connect, build, reach, touch, embrace, and heal."ⁱ Agency moves us from purpose to decision, to a conscious choice to act upon what gives our lives meaning.

"When the Civil Rights movement hung by a slender thread, its young leaders were baffled by storms of violence and political cynicism beyond what they had anticipated in their darkest imaginations. They argued strategy through the night—whether to go back to the violent streets, into the courts, back to the churches, around the schools, or to withdraw until they could figure it out. John Lewis, all of 23 years old, said, 'I'm marching.' They argued for another hour until Lewis said again, 'I'm marching.' Again they debated, wearing themselves out in analysis. The next morning, Lewis got up and marched. So did hundreds of others. It was all they could do at that moment, and so they did. He moved, chose, acted. That expression of agency created hope when there was none to be found. It will be remembered as a blessing long after Lewis lays his body down. It connected people who had been shattered. It created the possibility of coherence where there was little left."ⁱⁱ

The letter of James speaks directly to the emphasis on putting our faith into action. "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers." It is not enough to read the Bible or

listen to its interpretation in our lives. Faith takes practice. The important step is putting God's word into practice in our everyday lives. As John Ruskin said, "What we think, or what we know, or what we believe is, in the end, of little consequence. The only consequence is what we do."

Agency requires initiative. Too often we simply fail to seize the opportunity, to take the initiative, to make a move. A Chinese proverb says, "He who deliberates fully before taking a step will spend his entire life on one leg." Some people wait too long to begin life. They never take the risk of taking a step. Many of us are plagued by procrastination in some area of our lives. We tend to put off something unpleasant, uninteresting, or complex.

Philosopher & author William James said, "Nothing is so fatiguing as the hanging on of an uncompleted task." The longer we let things slide, the harder they become. The only way to get rid of a difficult task is to do it. That takes initiative.

A man who was employed by a duke and duchess in Europe was called in to speak to his employer.

"James," said the duchess, "how long have you been with us?"

"About thirty years, Your Grace," he replied.

"As I recall, you were employed to look after the dog."

"Yes, Your Grace," James replied.

"James, that dog died twenty-seven years ago."

"Yes, Your Grace," said James. "What would you like me to do now?"

Like James, many people wait for someone else to tell them what to do next. They may have good thoughts, ideas, and intentions, but many never translate those into action. Doing so requires initiative. Taking action is often the difference between success and failure. Once we take the initiative, the path forward will be revealed.

Agency is a life-giving force that generates more agency and action. A problem or challenge or opportunity might feel so overwhelming that we don't know where to start. It is helpful to break a task down into small manageable steps. When we take the risk of doing something, we discover what the next step will be. Activity breeds more activity, bearing the fruit of success.

When I was appointed to the church in Merced 10 years ago, Merced had just been chosen as the tenth campus of the University of California. In a few short years there would be college students walking what was then cow pastures. I began to act to prepare for their arrival. I shared the dream of a Wesley Foundation, a United Methodist campus ministry, for the university. I recruited one of the church's finest leaders for this new mission. We were in uncharted territory lacking a road map or book called, *Starting Campus Ministry for Dummies*. We simply prayed to discern God's guidance. We were always led to the next step, whether it was a resource person to consult or a fundraising workshop to attend. Early on I shared with the congregation the need to start an endowment for campus ministry. Lo and behold, someone read the church newsletter

and a Cal grad started the endowment with \$10,000! A new church member came with the talent of a graphic artist and designed a classy brochure for our fundraising efforts. With time the grand vision emerged: a residential student community generating income to make the ministry self-sustaining. However, even land in Merced was expensive at the time. We were dependent upon local churches for funding, most of which have their own financial difficulties. The team continued to take small steps. The economic downturn provided one blessing. This fall, eight years after it began, Wesley Foundation Merced has rented a house which serves as an intentional living community dedicated to mentoring Christian students.

We could have done nothing and watched the university grow up around us. We could have said, "Someone else will do it." We chose to take action to offer a ministry that would complement the university's mission of education. Each small step generated another step and gradually the vision is becoming a reality! Action generates additional action.

The Greek philosopher Socrates said, "To move the world we must first move ourselves." If we want to make change, we've got to take the first step. The action we take need not be on a grand scale. One teacher and scholar had translated medieval works, written important articles in her field, and made influential contributions to the theory and practice of teaching history. When asked if she planned to write "the big book" that laid out her theory of everything, she replied, "I prefer to do the small, beautiful thing."ⁱⁱⁱ

Knowing our purpose helps us to carefully select the actions that enable us to fulfill our own unique mission. For a few people, actions are taken on a grander scale, like my astronaut friend, Jose. Most of us are called to do "the small, beautiful thing" in our own corners of the world.

Something that often hinders our agency or action is the fear that the resources at hand are too limited. It is easy to excuse our inaction by saying, "If only I had more money...", "If only the company would give me five more team members...", "If only, then I could really do something significant."

A small village in South Africa had been part of one of the desolate homelands created for blacks by the apartheid South African government. For years the primary purpose of the village was to supply workers for the mines or industry in Johannesburg or elsewhere. The story of the village changed with the birth of the *Phakamani* project, a word which means "get up."

A woman tells the story. "We thought we had nothing, but then we began to realize we had everything we needed. In the beginning of the Bible it says that God created the world and it was good. God brought forth vegetation, and it was good. For so long we had been thinking that anything good was far away. We had been thinking that 'distant' Johannesburg is life. We had been thinking that our sons and daughters had to get away from here. We had been thinking we had nothing. But that is not true. God

gave us everything we need if we would just open our eyes. God gave us seeds. God gives us rain. God gives us ways to replenish the soil.”

They had seen the revival of a neighboring village whose people organized to build cisterns that gathered rainwater they then used to irrigate a well-mulched garden that provided a source of income, how proceeds from a bakery funded a small nursery, how homemade candles put money in the treasury, how a fencing project prevented overgrazing. They saw all this and wanted to reclaim their land and their lives as well.^{iv} Action turned passive victims of poverty into active agents capable of breaking the cycle of oppression that seems to mock God’s promise of life. Once they recognized the resources they truly possessed instead of focusing on what they lacked they were able to move forward and seize the opportunities for life.

Agency requires initiative. One action generates additional action. Doing the small, beautiful thing is as important as doing the grand, heroic task. We have all the resources we need.

A tourist paused for a rest in a small town in the mountains. He sat down on a bench next to an old man in front of the town’s only store. “Hi, friend,” he said, “can you tell me something this town is noted for?”

“Well,” answered the old man after a moment’s hesitation, “you can start here and get to anywhere in the world you want.”

Indeed we can go anywhere we want, if we act, but without agency we will never reach our potential. It is like a caterpillar that won’t get into its cocoon. It will never transform, forever relegated to crawling on the ground, even though it had the potential to fly.

May we dare to seize the opportunities that lie before us, acting with zeal and energy, so that we might reach our God-given potential in life.

ⁱ Gary Gunderson with Larry Pray, *Leading Causes of Life: Five Fundamentals to Change the Way You Live Your Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), p. 107.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, pp. 104-105.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stephanie Paulsell, “A small, beautiful thing,” *Christian Century*, March 20, 2007, p. 33.

^{iv} Gunderson, *ibid*, pp. 103-104.