

“My Father’s Business”

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss Jr.
Bryn Athyn Cathedral—February 20, 2022

“Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business?” (Luke 2:49)

“Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth.” (Mark 1:38)

“Sole purpose.” One of the most inspiring teachings in the Heavenly Doctrines uses a striking phrase which is our focus today, namely “the sole purpose.” Listen to the poetic calling to consider what should be our central life’s ambition:

“The sole purpose for which people are born is that they may perform a use to the community they are in, and to their neighbor while they live in the world, and in the next life may perform a use in accord with the Lord’s gracious purposes.” (*Arcana Caelestia* 1103.2)

One’s purpose gets us thinking about goals, achievement, focus, and direction. There is intentionality and even ambition in there too. So is meaning, fulfillment, centeredness and blessing. I think of someone doing what they’re uniquely suited to do, like a musical composer in the zone of creativity, with her mind trained on the flow of chords bringing to reality the way it all harmonizes and builds in her mind.

For us then, “the sole purpose”—the guiding direction, the thing that we’re uniquely gifted at doing, the focus of our creative energy and mental exertion by means of which we bring what is in the mind to reality in harmonious and beautiful ways—is our version of usefulness. The calling is to consider the ways we can contribute usefully within our community and with our neighbors—and there are countless ways of doing so—and let the Lord expand and refine that in ways that extend into eternity.

The Lord Himself gave us a powerful example while in the world. Mary and Joseph find Him, after a three day somewhat frantic search, in the Temple at age twelve “sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions,” and astonishing them with His answers (Luke 2:46). But that intellectual insight is not the point. It is the sense of direction that was confirmed within Him in the process that led Him to respond to Mary and Joseph, “Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business?” (vs. 49). What did He mean? It’s hard for us to grasp fully the Divine mindset reflected here, but one passage of many in the Heavenly Doctrines gives some insight:

While He lived in the world the Lord was engaged repeatedly in conflicts brought about by temptations, and was repeatedly victorious.... The Lord was filled repeatedly with an inmost confidence and faith that, because it was pure love out of which He was fighting for the salvation of the whole human race, He could not but be victorious. (*Arcana Caelestia* 1812; cf. *Heavenly Doctrine* 302)

Suffice it to say that the Lord is the perfect example of “sole purpose” put into action—of a Divine mind and heart entirely devoted to the reason He came on earth.

Let us turn then to the ways we are called to follow that example. We do so by engaging in with as much energy and devotion as we can muster in a life of spiritual purpose. That involves learning for a purpose, praying or worshiping for a purpose, repenting for a purpose, and ultimately serving with purpose.

Learning for a purpose. It starts with our version of exactly what we see with the Lord—learning the Lord’s will for our lives within the pages of His Word. To delve into this we can think of times in our lives where we have engaged in learning with a specific outcome in mind. Consider taking a drivers ed class or pouring over a “rules of the road” manual from the state in which you live for the purpose of obtaining a drivers license. We willingly take in information on road signs, safe distances to follow other cars, the specific things to be vigilant about while driving, and many other things all with the goal of being licensed. Or take the example of learning a foreign language. Tremendous effort can go into vocabulary, conjugations, conversational exchanges, and pronunciation so that we may converse with others in that language.

How much more important is this focused learning when it comes to spiritual life? We heard a powerful passage along these lines earlier in the service. It explains the words of Scripture, “To him who thirsts I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely” (Revelation 21:6) by saying, “This symbolically means that to those who desire truths for some useful spiritual purpose, the Lord will give of Himself through the Word everything conducive to that useful purpose” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 889).

Included in the list of things we could and should thirst for are: our own salvation, the salvation of others, serving the neighbor, and glorifying the Lord. The promise is that if our minds are trained on these things—on discovering and doing the Lord’s will—He will give us “everything conducive to that useful purpose.” We are given the example of a priest:

If a priest is prompted by the good of the priesthood, which is to provide for the salvation of souls, to teach the way to heaven, and to lead those whom he teaches, then to the extent that he is prompted by that good, thus by a love of it and desire for it, he acquires the truths he needs for him to teach and by which to lead. (*Doctrine of Life* 39)

The same invitation and opportunity is before all of us, to turn to the Word for guidance and instruction in how to be of service. A teacher wishing to bring New Church concepts into her classroom will find answers to that thirst. Parents wishing to raise their children with the Lord and the things of spiritual life in mind will discover the truths and resources that can help them serve. More generally any of us who turn to the Word to find guidance on our life’s purpose will discover the ingredients of true wisdom. The more we immerse ourselves and take time to reflect on what we learn, the more we will be enlightened in the peace-giving perspectives and action-oriented messages that are given to us freely.

Praying for a purpose. Next we reflect that it is the voice of the Lord Himself that we hear in the pages of His Word. It follows that it is to Him that we should turn. And we do so by the simple act of prayer.

Again we turn to the Lord Himself as an example. At the beginning of His adult ministry, after He had called some of His disciples and had begun to teach and heal, we learn of Him rising very early one morning, “long before daylight” retreating to a solitary place to pray (Mark 1:35). Like with Mary and Joseph in our earlier story, a search took place—some of those disciples looking for Him. It was Peter who said when they finally found Him, “Everyone is looking for you,” to which the Lord responded, “Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth” (Mark 1:37-38). What a wonderful example of praying for a purpose, of taking time in the beginning of a day to strengthen Himself or the “sole purpose” for which He came into the world.

No doubt this is an example we are extremely wise to follow. How active is our prayer life, and how focused is it? We know that we are to pray, but how often do we place ourselves before the Lord at the beginning of any given day with the ardent prayer that He help us to be focused on a life of useful service? We can imagine ourselves drawing on the Scriptures, again using the Lord’s own example, saying to the Lord, “Nevertheless not my will, but Thine be done” today (Luke 22:42)—and being more open that day to the Lord’s providence as our guide. It is within our grasp to place before the Lord a specific project or use on which we would like to make progress, with the intention of drawing on His wisdom and energy and inspiration. We might all agree that the Lord is able to flow into a humble and open heart with as much of His Divine energy and wisdom that we can absorb—giving to us a full response to our prayers for any useful purpose. As we read in the Psalms: “Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart” (37:4).

Repenting for a purpose. Of course, sometimes the answer to our prayers, or the insight into the most useful thing we can do to be more capable of serving, is to repent. One of the earliest and most repeated messages of the Lord’s ministry was to “repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). Casting our minds back on what we’ve discussed today, if we do spend time within the pages of the Lord’s Word, we will be reminded of the things that are forbidden to which we incline. When we turn to the Lord in prayer, that His will be done today, we may feel the pangs of conscience reminding us that it is time—time to go to battle against our worldly ambitions that are essentially self-oriented, or against our propensity to belittle when we feel threatened, or against our wandering eye and willingness to entertain lust, or against our desire to be seen as right and to win the argument at any cost. We all recognize our flaws and spiritual weaknesses. Despite our desire and ability to serve, or our innate kindness, or the ways in which the Lord leads us to exhibit integrity, we know that we have spiritual work to do.

In this regard I bring forward a fascinating passage in the Heavenly Doctrines that I refer to as the “surgery passage.” It’s actually about self-compulsion and repentance, but uses an allusion to surgery to make the point:

Take for example one who is willing to risk death for the sake of some particular end, or one who is willing to endure physical pain for the sake of their health. There is a willingness and so a certain freedom in those actions, though while they are taking risks or suffering pain these remove any feeling of willingness or freedom. So also with those who compel themselves to do what is good. (*Arcana Coelestia* 1937:4)

Many of us have reflected on loved ones, or ourselves, who get to a certain point that the pain of going through a surgical procedure is less than the pain of continuing with the ill-health of our current state. It's the same in our spiritual lives. The pain we see ourselves causing, or the agony of our plagued conscience, is eventually significant enough that we are willing to embrace the steps of repentance, even to the point of making ourselves openly accountable to others for the change we are committed to making.

What we learn is that this is the means to being the useful and loving and wise human beings that we yearn to be. We read in the Heavenly Doctrines, "The only way to heaven is for people from the Word to abstain from evils because they are sins" (*Apocalypse Explained* 798:7). So it is, in our quest for a life of spiritual purpose, that we go through the steps necessary to get there. We come before the Lord with a genuine and heartfelt desire to change for the better—to sacrifice something that has brought destructive pleasure, for the sake of our relationships, our marriage, our usefulness, our salvation.

Serving with purpose. "The sole purpose for which [we] are born is that [we] may perform a use to the community [we] are in, and to [our] neighbor while [we] live in the world" (*Arcana Caelestia* 1103.2). We've explored today some vital dimensions of that calling from the Lord to a life of spiritual purpose. One is the devotion to spiritual leaning. On any given day we can open ourselves to the Lord's teachings. With a consistent attention to this "fountain of the water of life" we will hear the many things that the Lord wants us to know—the perspectives He wishes us to embrace, the things that are hurtful and forbidden and why, and some specific insights into the issues on which we are trying to make progress. This is especially true if accompanied by prayer and a life of worshipful devotion. When we humbly place ourselves in the presence of the Lord, which we can also do on any given day, we can be confident that He will flow in. We will feel comfort and centeredness, we will be strengthened, and we will receive answers in exchange for our patient and quiet listening.

And if the calling in those times of prayer is to some avenue of repentance—to turn away from something that has been plaguing us, we can be sure that the Lord will come in with His Divine power to conquer for us, and will also flow in with the opposite good, super-charging our ability to be the useful human being that we long to be.

All of these are parts of a life of spiritual purpose. Our version of our Father's business is a life of useful service—being the best person we can be for others, so that we can contribute something needed and valuable within the Lord's kingdom. May we be among those who thirst for the waters of life, trusting that to the extent we set our hearts on some useful spiritual purpose, "the Lord will give of Himself through the Word everything conducive to that useful purpose" (*Apocalypse Revealed* 889), and lead us to serve capably to eternity in accord with His gracious purposes (*Arcana Caelestia* 1103). **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord's Word: Luke 2:45-50, Mark 1:35-39, *Apocalypse Revealed* 889.

Luke 2

⁴⁵ So when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him. ⁴⁶ Now so it was *that* after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers. ⁴⁸ So when they saw Him, they were amazed; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously."

⁴⁹ And He said to them, "Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" ⁵⁰ But they did not understand the statement which He spoke to them.

Mark 1

³⁵ Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and those *who were* with Him searched for Him. ³⁷ When they found Him, they said to Him, "Everyone is looking for You."

³⁸ But He said to them, "Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth." ³⁹ And He was preaching in their synagogues throughout all Galilee, and casting out demons.

Apocalypse Revealed 889

"To him who thirsts I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely." This symbolically means that to those who desire truths for some useful spiritual purpose, the Lord will give of Himself through the Word everything conducive to that useful purpose.... Thirsting symbolizes a desire for something for some useful spiritual purpose because one may thirst for or desire concepts of truth from the Word for some natural purpose and also for some spiritual purpose. People who do so for some natural purpose have a reputation for learning as their goal, and in consequence of their learning prestige, honor and material gain. Thus they have themselves and the world in view. But people who do so for some spiritual purpose have serving the neighbor as their goal, out of a love for the neighbor, and they consider the welfare of his or her soul, as well as their own. Thus they have the Lord, the neighbor, and salvation in view. Such people are given truth from the fountain of the water of life, that is, from the Lord through the Word, to the extent that it is conducive to that purpose.