

What's My Purpose?
The Gospel Goes to Broadway: Pippin
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Psalm 139:1-18

The musical Pippin opened on Broadway in 1972, it ran for about 5 years and had almost 2000 performances in its original run. It employs the premise of a mysterious performance troupe, led by a Leading Player narrator (originally played by Ben Vereen), to tell the story of Pippin, a young prince on his search for meaning and significance.

The show is a parable set in the time of Charlemagne. And as it turns out, Charlemagne really did have a son named Pippin, his oldest boy, but the musical has little to do with those historical characters. The title character is supposed to symbolize us – you and me, and every single person that is born and wants to live a meaningful life.

Pippin goes on a quest, searching for fulfillment as he sings... *Rivers belong where they can ramble, eagles belong where they can fly, I've got to be where my spirit can run free, gotta find my corner of the sky.*

During his journey, Pippin tries everything in his desire to find fulfillment: fame, fortune, power, sex – you name it. And all these things are fun for him for a while, but eventually their colors begin to fade as Pippin is left fulfilled. Finally, he seeks out the advice of his grandmother, who he's always loved and admired, and in her wisdom, she tells him to stop worrying. Life, she says, is too short! Pippin needs to start living in the moment, to be fully present in the life he is living NOW. Ironically, the actress who originally played Pippin's grandmother on Broadway, Irene Ryan of the Beverly Hillbillies, had a stroke during a performance and died four weeks later.

Life is too short to be obsessed with worry – we know it, oh, we know it - and yet, we still struggle. The word worry comes from the old English "wyrgran" which means to strangle, to choke. And that's what we're doing to ourselves when we worry – we're strangling ourselves. Worry chokes off our desire for life, it hurts us emotionally, mentally, physically, spiritually. Perhaps the first thing we need to do to overcome worry is to remind

ourselves what Jesus said, that worrying won't do us a bit of good, in fact, it will harm us.¹

Of course, reminding you of that now makes me a hypocrite! Many of you know that 35 of us have recently returned from a Senior PF mission trip to Indianapolis, where we worked with the city's vast network of hunger relief agencies. In the months leading up to the trip, each adult advisor on our team takes on responsibility to prepare us. Some of us interview and train college advisors, one of us sets up a transportation plan, another works to ensure we will be fed. My role was to find us a host church and worksites, which makes sense because I have contacts in local churches and know how to communicate with busy non-profits.

Taking on that responsibility also means that I will engage in a level of worrying which will predictably increase as the moment when we leave the parking lot draws near.

Some of the questions that kept me up at night:

Will our host church be able to accommodate us, or will we break their plumbing on the first night?

Will the work sites be run so that the PF'ers are busy, so that they feel they've done enough work for all their efforts?

What if something happens to all those waivers, or what if a site cancels on us?

Most importantly, will our youth have meaningful encounters with those we serve?

It's in those times that I hope to remember the words of Mark Twain who said: *"I've seen many troubles in my time, only half of which ever came true."*

The reality, for me at least, is more like 80-90% of what I worry about never happens. Our host church, Ellenburger UCC, turned out to be a sweet, small, mostly elderly congregation that needed young people to help with some special projects around the campus – for us, a perfect fit. And when one of the non-profits cancelled on us, there was still plenty to be done at Gleaners, the big food bank. Our teens gained an appreciation for the people

¹ Matthew 6:25-34

they assisted, asking them questions about their lives and listening deeply to their answers. I'm so proud of their compassion and selflessness.

Next year I'll try and remember the words of Jesus and Pippin's grandmother: *Do not worry, live in the moment, be present and life will be more fulfilling.* We're all a work in progress!

After Pippin leaves his grandmother, he continues to spiral down, becoming so depressed about not finding fulfillment that he gets very sick. At one crucial moment he is rescued and nursed back to health by a woman named Katherine who has a little boy named Theo. They live on a farm and so they take him home and nurse him to health and in time the three of them develop a very special relationship. And of course, as in most musicals, the two leads fall in love.

Pippin seems happy, but along with this new life comes responsibilities. He must feed the chickens and the hogs, he must fix the leaking roof, and when Theo's pet duck dies, Pippin tries to console the inconsolable. It's not fun. Realizing that he has not completed his mission to find the thing that is completely fulfilling, he leaves Katherine and Theo and contemplates ending his life.

And now, we realize why the chorus of players began the show singing *"we've got magic to do for you, miracle plays to play"* You see, they had known something that Pippin had yet to discover: that fulfillment is only an illusion, it's magic. And just as Pippin is about to take his own life, he has an incredible revelation, and sings these words: *"I'm not a river, or a giant bird that soars to the sea; and if I'm never tied to anything, I'll never be free... and if I'm never tied to anything, I'll never be free."*

Pippin returns to Katherine and Theo. In the very last line of the show, he's asked about his choice to make a commitment, and this is what he says: *"How do I feel? Trapped. But happy."* Pippin has discovered the paradox of commitment.

For many of us, the word 'commitment' sends up red flags. We think it's like being bound to something, tied down, trapped, not having freedom. But when I think of the things that I have been most committed to in my lifetime, I realize that they are the things that have been most meaningful to me, the most life giving, the most fulfilling, the most freeing.

You can be sure that the musician whose fingers glide effortlessly up and down the piano keys so freely is the pianist who practices the scales daily.

And that the vocalist who stands before you to sing a high “c” as if it was nothing is the singer who has had voice lesson after voice lesson after voice lesson.

And the most successful craftsman is the one who has dedicated countless hours to learning all the nuances of his or her craft or trade.

Commitment can lead to freedom, life, healing... that’s the paradox.

When the people of Israel were about to enter the Promised Land, Moses can’t enter it with them and so he wants to offer them one last word, one last speech, and what does he tell them? The paradox of commitment... he says, *“you want to experience life? Then be committed to loving God and following God’s commandments and you will have life.”*²

Jesus said essentially the same thing *“I’ve come so that you can experience life in all its fullness”*³ – which is the very thing Pippin was looking for. Moses told people you experience life by loving God and following the commandments, Jesus basically said the same thing, he said the two most important commandments are love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

Is that going to make you rich?

Is that going to make you famous?

Is that going to solve all your problems? Of course not.

Pippin’s purpose, as it turns out, isn’t to be the flashy prince featured in an entertainment troupe. It’s to live out his commitments to the family he was given. He became a part of something greater than himself, and in doing so discovered what I hope the rest of us already know: Having things or doing things doesn’t bring ultimate peace or fulfillment. Never will.

What Moses and Jesus were saying and what Pippin eventually discovered is that relationships are what bring you peace and fulfillment, especially the most important one: our relationship with God.

An auctioneer wasn’t sure if it was right to waste time on the old violin, it was so battered and scarred. But she held it up with a smile, anyway – *what am I bid, good folk? A dollar, a dollar? How about two. Who’ll make it three? Three dollars once, three dollars twice...*

² Deuteronomy 33

³ John 10:10

From the back of the room a grey-haired old man came forward and picked up the bow. Wiping the dust from the old violin, he tightened the loose strings then played a melody so pure and sweet, it was like an angel singing.

When he finished playing, the auctioneer, in a quieter voice said "*What am I bid now for the old violin? A thousand dollars? And who will make it two? Two thousand? Who will make it three? Three thousand once, three thousand twice, and sold!*"

The people cheered, but some of them cried "*We do not understand what changed its worth?*" Swift came the reply: the touch of the master's hand gave the old instrument purpose again. That's the magic. That's the miracle. Amen.