

“On a fall day in 1930, the historian and philosopher Will Durant was raking leaves in the yard of his home in Lake Hill, New York, when a well-dressed man walked up to him. The man told Durant that he was planning to commit suicide unless the popular philosopher could give him ‘one good reason’ to live. Shocked, Durant attempted to respond in a way that would bring the man comfort – but his response was uninspired: ‘I bade him get a job – but he had one; to eat a good meal – but he was not hungry; he left visibly unmoved by my arguments’”

That’s the beginning paragraph of a book I’ve been reading by Emily Esfanani Smith entitled, The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life that Matters. Esfanani Smith was raised as a Sufi Muslim, but fell away from her religion. Her book is an attempt to find meaning in her life, and any human life, without that faith. Basically, she is asking the same question that man asked Durant – why go on living if we’re all going to die anyway? She has investigated many reports and papers by psychologists and sociologists exploring the human condition and what

makes for happiness. Esfanani Smith found that the real question isn't about happiness, but meaning. What destroys lives isn't unhappiness. Many people are unhappy but continue on, sometimes with very productive, fruitful lives. The key is whether their lives have meaning. Humans don't flourish, or even survive long, without meaning.

Esfanani Smith eventually concludes that there are four things human beings need in order to have meaningful lives: a sense of belonging, purpose, storytelling – feeling they are part of a story, and transcendence, a connection to something larger in which they can lose themselves. While reading this I was tempted to say to myself, “Well, Duh!” Following Christ provides for all of those things if we enter into His way whole-heartedly. Not surprisingly for One who created human beings, Jesus gives us what we need to flourish – connection to a community to belong to in the Church, to a mission in proclaiming Jesus' message, connection to the great story of salvation history, and even connection to the transcendent God Himself, through prayer and

communion. But then, to be fair, Esfanani Smith recognizes all this. She knows that religion has historically provided these things. But she, without any faith, was trying to find a workable substitute.

Today I want to use her search and conclusions as a way into our gospel passage. “No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” This saying of Jesus underlines a basic principle of who we are as human beings. Note: Jesus takes for granted that we are inevitably servants. Every person will serve – someone or something. We have the freedom to choose whom we serve, but not whether we will serve. Satan in John Milton’s Paradise Lost famously lived by the motto, “I will not serve!” That is the battle cry of Hell. But this is Satan’s greatest lie. He does serve – it’s just that he has chosen to serve only himself.

Whom or what do I serve? The Mammon of the Gospel is the god of money and wealth, a short-cut to saying – my own pleasure and

desires. The great danger in life, the road to a crisis of meaning and hopelessness, suicide, is to serve my own pleasure and desires. Then I get trapped inside myself: which is a good working definition of hell.

Jesus Christ, on the other hand, proclaims that the meaning of life, heaven as opposed to hell, is to serve God as Master, and in doing so to also serve other human beings. As Pope Francis has said, “The life of Jesus is a life for others.” That is something that even a non-believer, Esafanani Smith, discovered. That is why one of the four goals of our Five Year Pastoral Plan is to increase our service to others.

Today I want to offer you a chance to serve our brothers and sisters in a new way as we prepare for Lent. This coming Saturday, March 4, is our third annual Service Day at HFK. From 9:30 until 2:00 we will offer a variety of ways to serve other people here on campus or by going on a mini-mission trip out into our community. You can spend as much or as little time as you wish. The opportunities range from cooking a meal, or making a care package for the homeless, to yard

clean-up for the Friend of Youth, to going to the Skagit to help the immigrant workers, and much more. Sign up after mass in the east narthex or at the café, or visit hfkparish.com for more information.

In the conclusion of her book Esfanani Smith states, “Love, of course, is at the center of the meaningful life . . . stepping outside of the self to connect with and contribute to something bigger.” None of this comes as a surprise to those of us who have decided to serve the God who has told us He is Love.

But it does remind us of what we could say to that unidentified man contemplating suicide in Will Durant’s front yard. If he couldn’t hear a word about Jesus’s gospel right away, I would tell him to start serving someone else. I would ask him to delay his suicide long enough to first volunteer helping someone in worse shape than he was in. I would give him something bigger than himself to care about, a meaningful life, by loving at least one other human being in a concrete

way. That is what serving God looks like. But it's good advice for all of us. We cannot serve God and Mammon. So, which will we serve?