

The Life You've Always Wanted  
Romans 7:14-25a

July 3, 2005, Rev. Mark Statler, Saint Paul's United Methodist Church, Joplin, MO

Today we are taking a short one-week break from the sermon series about relationships. Those men out there who were anxious to for your wives or girlfriends to hear about what Men wish Women knew about Men are just going to have to wait another week. Sorry. You can probably understand my hesitance in delivering a message with my first sermon that would be primarily directed to all the women in the church.

So as I begin, I want to take just a few extra minutes today to share my family with you. Andrew (4) **[picture of Andrew & Caroline]** is boundless with energy and enthusiasm. He has firm opinions and doesn't mind sharing them. He is bright-eyed about the world around him, and quick to figure out how things work, especially finding ways to make things work in his favor! He loves trucks, fast cars, trains, and tools. He already keeps a pretty good beat and carries a good tune. He will be in pre-school here at Saint Paul's this fall.

Caroline is peaceable and calm. She loves to read, draw, write and play with her American Girl doll and watch Animal Planet. She is very relational, but equally enjoys spending time by herself. She loves to sing. She is very considerate of others and likes to be helpful. She will be starting 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade this year.

Jennifer, my wife, will be starting her 2<sup>nd</sup> stint in Kindergarten this year, teaching that is, in the Carl Junction Schools. Jennifer is a strong and resourceful woman, whose integrity and compassion and grace are all inspiring to me. She makes some mean Chocolate Chip cookies, and is really pretty masterful at desserts in general....this is an obsession we share.

I was raised in the home of a Methodist pastor, living in lots of towns in eastern Missouri. I never had any ambition about being a pastor. I like golf, woodworking, minor home maintenance, and music. I have come to Saint Paul's to serve as Pastor of Discipleship and Missions. My direct areas of responsibility are going to be in the areas of small groups, Bible Studies, Adult Sunday School, AND helping people find a place to use their gifts in service for God.

Even though I was raised in a strong Christian environment, It wasn't until I was 20, after a few years of living life on my own terms (that is code, by the way, for going off to college and kind of losing control for awhile), that the faith of my parents became MY faith, and I accepted the grace and salvation that Jesus offers and invited him to lead my life. And for as much growth in Christ as I have experienced in the past 20 years, I know, just as you probably know, that I have not completed my journey of growth in Christ. In fact, I can say, that my life is no where near what God's desire for me is. But it is also a long way from where I started.

And that is what I want us to wrestle with today. The difference between where our lives are and where God wants to lead us, by his grace. So, borrowing the title and some direction from John Ortberg, I want to talk about [title screen] **THE LIFE YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED.**

For me, when I am really honest with myself and with God, there is a real sense of disappointment, not so much with particular things I have done as much as aspects of who I have become. I have a nagging sense that all is not as it should be.

You see, the life we think we've always wanted is elusive. What we tend to think is that when we get the things we need, when the circumstances are right, when my finances get to a certain place, when I have kids, when the kids are finally gone, when I get the perfect job....whatever....then we will have the life we've always wanted.

But what happens? We get to that place and guess what...nothing's really changed. Life is the same. Experience teaches us that reaching for the life we've always wanted will never result in true contentment. Jesus teaches us that our life is not fulfilled by reaching for what we want....we know this, right? IT is not in fulfilling our needs that we find the life we've always wanted. It is in giving our life away to Jesus and allowing God to lead us that we will find the life we've truly wanted...the life our souls long for...the kind that brings peace, joy, and ultimate satisfaction.

So what's the deal? How is it that our heads and hearts know where we can find true life, meaningful life, transformed life, and yet we continue to pursue our own agendas? Why is it that we don't allow God to shape us into the person God had in mind when he uniquely created us?

Maybe one of the most profound statements I have ever heard about the human condition was one I learned by the time I was five years old. It was spoken often by a cartoon character, Popeye the Sailor Man. **[insert Popeye Picture with "I yam what I yam."]** When he was frustrated or wasn't sure what to do or felt inadequate, Popeye would simply say, "I yam what I yam."

Now Popeye was not a sophisticated guy. And I'm not picking on Popeye, because in many ways we need to be more like him. Many of us go through life pretending we are someone we are not. Popeye, knew who he was: a simple, sea-faring, pipe-smoking, Olive Oyl-loving sailor man, and he wouldn't pretend to be anything else. ... I yam what I yam.

But I always perceived a note of sadness in Popeye's expression. It was generally offered as an explanation of his shortcomings. It does not anticipate much change or growth. It doesn't leave him much of a shot at getting to be

what he yam not. “Don’t get your hopes up,” he seemed to be saying. “Don’t expect too much. I yam what I yam – [and he would add in his bleakest moments] – that’s all that I yam.

That is the sad cry of the human race. You have said those words, in your own way, and so have I. This is the struggle between disappointment and hope.

Just the word itself, dis-appointment, is telling. I am missing the life I was appointed by God to live. And I have dis-appointed God. I have removed God from the appointed place, the central role he longs to play in my life; I have refused to let God be God, and have appointed myself in his place. I yam what I yam.

The apostle Paul, writing in the book of Romans, knows exactly what we’re talking about. It is this struggle between living the life WE want and finding the life we’ve always wanted in God.

**[insert romans 7:15-25a NIV]**

**<sup>15</sup>I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. <sup>16</sup>And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup>As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. <sup>18</sup>I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature.<sup>[a]</sup> For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. <sup>19</sup>For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do this I keep on doing. <sup>20</sup>Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.**

**<sup>21</sup>So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. <sup>22</sup>For in my inner being I delight in God's law; <sup>23</sup>but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. <sup>24</sup>What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup>Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!**

OK – so what I Paul really saying here?

He says, “I do not do the things I want, but I do just the opposite.”

I yam what I yam.

“How can I explain it?”, Paul says....”I know that the laws of God are good....they help me know right from wrong, good from bad...but I can’t keep them...try as I may....I am a disappointment, I yam what I yam.”

Paul then goes on to describe his predicament to a group of Christians like this: “I can only explain it like this. Sin still has a hold on me, and the law (the rules and regulations of the Old Testament) lets me know that but the rules don’t give me power to overcome. It’s like there is a war going on between my spirit (wants to please God) and my self-centered will (that wants to please me). I yam what I yam.”

Paul says of himself, “look at how pitiful I am. Look at how wretched I am. Look at what a disappointment I am....who is going to rescue me? Paul then thanks God, because he knows he has been rescued...through the grace of Jesus.

See, Paul would agree with Popeye and us, “I yam what I yam”, but Paul would never agree that “that’s all I yam.” Paul is telling himself, the church in Rome and us, “That’s not all I am. I have hope for more...much more. “I am called to become the person God had in mind when he originally designed me.” And that can happen, through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ! Thanks be to God!

Becoming the person God had in mind. This is the goal of the Christian life. This is the very essence of the Christian Journey. To become the person God had in mind. To allow Jesus to use our lives.

You know, this is why we came to Saint Paul’s. I believe that coming here is part of God’s work in shaping me into the person God wants me to be. And I feel called to serve among you to help you discover the person God wants you to be.

The word we use for becoming the person God has in mind is TRANSFORMATION. It’s not about making up our mind to change. This is something we can’t do on our own. We need God’s help. This is about allowing God space in our lives to shape us and re-create us. It is about allowing God’s grace to work in and out of our lives. This is God’s work. And here’s the good news....God wants to do this work in us! In me. In you.

We may say, “I yam what I yam.” But we believe, we profess with our faith that God can take what we are and transform our lives into something more eternally fulfilling. AMEN?

So yes, like Popeye, “I yam what I yam,” And God knows exactly what I yam!!!! but by the grace of God “that is not all that I yam.” Thanks be to God!

Even in the cartoon, there was more to Popeye. For the life of me, I don’t understand why it was spinach. Did the spinach growers coop own a majority share in the cartoon, or what? Anyway...when the Spinach appeared, Popeye

was transformed. He became so much more than he really was. He was infused with courage and power and he became the savior.

Jesus promised us that when we let his spirit live in us, when we invite him into our lives and make room for him to live in us...we would become so much more than we really are. We would be TRANSFORMED with his love, his healing power, his forgiveness, his joy, his strength. We would find the life we've always wanted.

This transformation happens, I believe, when our lives intersect with Jesus and his spirit, his unconditional love, his healing. We don't control this transformation, it is God's work in us. But we can make our lives more available and accessible to God. We can place ourselves in transformational experiences. These are places we know by experience that our lives intersect with God. So here are some real practical places where exactly this kind of transformational intersection happens, and I want to share them with you.

**[insert list] places where transformational intersections happen**

- 1. Prayer**
- 2. Reading and Studying Scripture**
- 3. Worship**
- 4. Serving (ministry & mission)**

**[keep list up]** now that's a pretty traditional list. I mean, that looks like a churchy list right? Pretty basic stuff. You're out there saying...This guy went to seminary and this is all he can come up with? Yeah, and creativity is one of my gifts! But you know there's a reason it's pretty basic. Because 2000 years of the church's experience has shown that it is in these places that Jesus meets us and our lives are transformed.

But there is an X factor that I need to add to the list. I call it the X factor because it is a multiplier. And any time you add this ingredient to the list above, the measure of our availability and openness to God multiplies exponentially.

**[add to list]**

**x. people.**

Where did Jesus say he was placing his Spirit? In us!!! I know Aaron, I know you've heard this a thousand times. We are not on this journey alone. We were never meant to be. While Jesus offers us a personal relationship with him, He also placed us in a kingdom, a body, a church, where we are in relationship with other Christians. We need each other! And when we come together to pray, study, worship, and serve, transformation happens.

Obviously God can work a miracle of transformation anywhere and anytime God wants. But it has been my experience that God still regularly uses these basic

experiences + the X factor: people, to transform my life. This is when I begin to live into the life I've always wanted.

Ten years ago I met a guy named Todd. I met with him at lunch time in a Wendy's on Glenstone Ave in Springfield in the summer of 1995. We were starting a new church and Todd's grandmother sent us his name and asked us to call him. Todd became part of our small group starting a church. And over the next few years, I watched this guy being transformed. He began to give himself not just for study groups, but also in service to others in the name of Christ. Within a few years, this divorced, classic rock morning DJ was giving up a week of his vacation to serve as a counselor at camp Galilee. He was fully intending for God to transform his life by the experience. God did.

Not only was Todd experiencing a new calling of God in his life, he met a Christian woman that week who would later become his wife.

Just two weeks ago, Jennifer, the kids and I went to visit Todd on a Sunday morning, and we shared the joy of hearing him lead worship and preach. We thought back to ten years ago when Todd was out there on his own. He knew even then that God was trying to get his attention, but it wasn't until Todd opened up his life through small groups and serving others that he found the life he always wanted. HE discovered the life God had in store for him.

Shortly after I became a Christian, I was in a Bible Study. (included prayer, study of scripture, worship and people). We were studying Acts. I was reading Acts 1:8, when Jesus says, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the world." That scripture in that study transformed my life. It was my call into ministry. I happened to be alone in personal reading time when that verse hit me like a ton of bricks, it literally became alive – even audible – and I could not ignore it. But I wouldn't have been reading that verse and opening up my life had it not been for the accountability of being in a study group, and I truly believe I wouldn't have heard that verse in the way God intended if God hadn't used the people in that group to open up my heart. To prepare me on the front side, and confirm it on the back side.

I grew up as a Preacher's Kid. I had absolutely no desire to be a pastor...this was not my will. It was a moment of transformation where God was leading me, ironically, into the life I always wanted. The life my soul longer for. The life that would fulfill God's desires for me.

As I look back over my life, I know my journey is not complete, I am yet to become all that God wants me to become, but those moments of growth, those moments of God's transforming me came when I was praying, worshiping, studying, or serving with others! I have been transformed by Disciple Bible Studies, by Camino and Walk to Emmaus experiences, by serving at a Bible

School, by a week at youth camp, by mission trip experiences, by lifting my voice in praise and celebration with others.

There are some very private and personal experiences with God in my history. Some. But there are many more experiences of transformation when I am studying, praying, worshiping, or serving with others.

And I am here at Saint Paul's to help us create more opportunities for transformation particularly through the ministries of prayer, study and serving by creating or enhancing ministries like small groups, bible studies, and finding places for people to serve Christ by serving others.

Vision: I believe God wants to transform the world. And for God to transform the world, God is going to use everyday normal (WELL...) people like you and me. And for us to transform the world with the love of Christ, guess what, we have to constantly be placing our lives in the transformational moments and allowing Jesus to reshape our lives.

MY MISSION AT SAINT PAUL'S is this: to help connect every person who currently calls Saint Paul's their church home (AND the Hundreds, maybe thousands more who someday will call Saint Paul's their home)...to connect to and engage in ministries that will transform their lives.

Specifically, **[insert goals]** the goal that I am setting is that every person at Saint Paul's would be involved in at least three transformational ministries every year (in addition to regular worship attendance).

1. **participation in a small group or prayer group** that is ongoing, developing deeper relationships and with some level of accountability and encouragement.
2. **participation in a shorter term bible study** (short term growth groups), where biblical understanding is developed, or faith/life skills are learned.
3. **Find a place to serve in ministry.** This could be ongoing or short term. That at least once every year, you offer yourself in service to Christ by serving others (inside or outside the walls). That's not a lot to ask. There are many here who serve way more than one ministry/year. And we are so grateful for their servanthood. But just imagine if EVERYONE did something.

Moving that from vision into reality is why I'm here. I believe that is why God has brought me here. The more people we enable to be in accountability groups, study groups, and serving groups, the more lives God is going to be transforming...and the more people who are going to find the life they've always wanted.

I once heard Leonard Sweet say, **[Insert quote: “Making a difference in the world is too puny of a goal for a Christian. Jesus didn’t come to make a difference in the world. Jesus came to make a different world!”]**

Saint Paul’s does not exist just to make a difference in the world. Saint Paul’s is about making a different world...about allowing Jesus to use us to build the eternal and universal Kingdom of God. I am coming here to join you in your mission to love and serve Christ...to let him use us to build the kingdom of God...to lead everyone to an ACTIVE faith in Christ...to open up lives to the transforming power of God...not just to make a difference in the world, but to make a different world...to help people discover, by the grace of God, the life they’ve always wanted.

And for Today, that is the good news, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.