



“How Long Do I Have?”
Scripture – John 6:51-58
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, August 19, 2018

Have you ever attended a party where the host invited too many guests? You are in a room that could comfortably hold 15 people. The only problem is that there are 30 of you. You are forced to talk to whomever is standing directly in front of you or beside you because the room is too jammed for you to circulate. Here is a surefire way to thin out the room. Get everyone’s attention and announce that you are going to talk about death.

Last week, we shuffled through the church file that contains completed copies of “Intentions at the Time of Death.” I was struck by the fact that we had papers on fewer than 10% of our members. I guess that means ninety percent of you have no intention of dying!

As I have mentioned in the past, if you want to live a long life, be a member of Westminster. Currently we have 46 members who are in their 90s, and we have five members over 100. Still, none of us are going to be walking around here forever. Which begs the question: How long do you have?

Dudley Clendinen was a writer, so when his doctor told him that he had ALS – Lou Gehrig’s Disease – he sat down at his keyboard and tapped out an essay. Playing off what most of us wish – to live a good long life – he entitled his article, “The Good *Short* Life.” He wrote: “We obsess in this country about how to eat and dress and drink, about finding a job and a mate. About having sex and children. About how to live. But we don’t talk about how to die.”¹

He was neither wallowing in self-sorrow, nor attempting to drag people into a state of depression. His point was that when we face our mortality, we get serious about living – living with a purpose, focusing on joy, nurturing life-giving relationships, and most importantly, making decisions about how we will spend the remaining time we have.

Today’s text comes from the Gospel of John. In language that is both shocking and crass, Jesus declares, “I am the living bread...Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” When we hear it, our Pavlovian response is to leap to the Lord’s Supper, but is that really the focus of his words?

When Jesus utters these sentences, he is addressing a crowd comprised of both supporters and opponents. His adversaries take him literally and throw out a question to everyone within earshot: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

Rather than thumping his forehead and muttering about their simplemindedness, Jesus magnifies his graphic image. “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”

What prevents us from dashing for the doors or imagining that he has plucked lines from the script of a B grade vampire movie is that we know Jesus loved to invoke the provocative to make his message memorable. On other occasions, he said such things as: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” He told his followers that they were required to forgive someone, not seven times, but 77 times. He said, “If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.” He regularly used hyperbole so that his teachings would be unforgettable.

What he was trying to get across to these dullards was to chew on his teachings and drink in his Spirit. That would help them see the world through the eyes of Jesus and live as he lived – having compassion for people in need, resisting evil, speaking the truth, and working for the common good.

When we hear his words – with years of identifying the body and blood of Jesus with the bread and wine of communion – our minds naturally shift to thoughts about the sacrament.

And yet, this is actually a secondary theme of the passage. While the vivid language of Jesus appears to highlight the Lord’s Supper, his primary message is something else. Our clue is that the words “life, live, and living” appear nine times in these eight verses.

Jesus does not simply say “I am the bread of life.” He says, “I am the *living* bread...Whoever eats this bread will *live forever*.” In case his hearers ignore those words, Jesus adds, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have *eternal life*.” He underscores his point, explaining, “I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me *will live*.” And just in case we still have not heard him rightly, Jesus sums up his discourse with these words: “The one who eats this bread will *live forever*.”

Jesus buoys the hope of his followers by talking about life: life eternally in God’s heavenly kingdom and rich, full life during our time on earth. A few chapters later, Jesus will return to this theme and say, “I came that (you) may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Jeffrey Piehler, a medical doctor, recalls the night he and his wife invited a good friend over for a glass of wine. After Piehler had drunk enough to loosen his tongue, he decided it was the right moment to bring it up. In a calm voice, he announced to his wife: “I’m going to build my own coffin. I just thought you should know.”

“It did not go well. Her first reaction – silence – quickly turned to anger. Then came demands for an explanation, then commands to desist. Finally she fell silent again...this time in punishing disapproval.”

Her reaction took him by surprise because he did not think his plan was that extreme. After all, he had been living with Stage 4 prostate cancer for 11 years, and he had tried every conceivable treatment and had run out of options. He felt fortunate that he had been able to travel, to photograph, and to write. Although he had to give up his surgical practice, the extra time had allowed him to draw closer to his family and friends.

With the failure of the treatments and his bones riddled with the disease, he knew his journey was coming to an end. He said, “As we used to say in the medical business, I’m starting to circle the drain.”

When he told others that he was planning to build his own coffin they became uneasy. They protested that he was giving up. That’s not how he saw it. The idea came to him when he was attending the funeral of an 18-year-old who was lying in a plush mahogany casket despite the fact that he was going to be cremated. Piehler was also planning to be cremated, but a mahogany coffin and cremation seemed like a contradiction.

After some investigation, he discovered that people are generally cremated in some kind of cardboard container. He said, “My ecological conscience argued for recycled cardboard, yet that implied that my ashes would spend eternity blended with the powdered remains of ice cream containers and pizza boxes. I’m sure one could do worse, but why not opt for a more elemental final mix: me and...a plain pine box. Creating something of beauty and purpose would be both a celebration and an acceptance of my death.”

He contacted Peter, an artist who works with wood. On the surface, they were an odd pair. Peter’s earring, tattoos and free spirit were so unlike the doctor’s proper fussiness. But as they built it, they drew closer together. Each talked about what he wanted to accomplish with the time he had remaining. Each shared his regrets.

As the coffin began to take shape, the doctor spoke of his fears of death and the sadness of leaving his family behind. In moments like that, they set aside their tools and talked quietly.

“There were also moments of dark humor...(Piehler wisecracked) ‘Does this thing come with a lifetime guarantee?’ They even made matching T-shirts that read: I’m dying to show you my latest project.” I am sure that went over well with his wife.

In the end, they created “a stunningly beautiful pine box, and a stunningly beautiful friendship.”

Something else happened. He said it smoothed his rough edges. He wrote, “It’s pretty much impossible to feel anger at someone for driving too slowly in front of you when you have just come from sanding your own coffin.” He added, “Coveting material objects, holding on to old grudges, failing to pause and see the grace in strangers - all equally foolish. While the coffin is indeed a reminder of what awaits us all, its true message is to live every moment to its greatest potential.”²

None of us need to build our own pine box, but we do need to spend time focusing on what we would like to accomplish with the time we have remaining. And since none of us know how long we have, we need to promise ourselves that we will not put off the most important matters. To whom do you need to express your love and appreciation? Who should you forgive? What would you like to pass on to your children or friends?

To spur you on, we have given you a copy of “Intentions at the Time of Death.” Your memorial service needs to be a fitting tribute to your life. Please do not tell me that you have told your spouse or child what you want and that is good enough. If it is not in writing, it is not good enough. I have sat with many families after the death of a loved one and many are in a fog. In their grief, they simply cannot recall certain details.

Parts of the document, such as the name of your attorney or executor of your will or the location of your insurance documents, are unnecessary for our church files. But someone in your family needs to know those things.

Also, give some thought to the passages of Scripture and the hymns you would like in your service. If you have no strong choice, please leave it to the church staff to pick something appropriate for the occasion. From experience, I can tell you that it is regrettable when a longtime faithful member ends up with trite hymns in his service because his daughter who has not been in worship in 30 years selects the hymns she liked as a teenager.

Fill out the parts of the form that you would like the church to keep on record and mail it in to us or drop it at the front desk some Sunday. And regardless of who has copies, you can always make changes. Plus, it is much easier to fill out these forms when you are healthy, than when you in decline.

In one of her poems (Singapore), Mary Oliver has a line that took up residence in my soul. Recalling a fleeting encounter with a woman in the Singapore airport, whose job was scrubbing the toilets, Mary wrote: “I want to

see her rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river. This probably won't happen. But maybe it will." Then, the line that stuck with me: "If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it."

Thanks be to God that the world is not only painful, but also joyful; not only logical, but rife with beautiful surprises. There are amazing turnarounds that defy all odds. There are better tomorrows even when it is deemed impossible. Logic leads us to the conclusion that life ends in death. But the words of Scripture echo an intuition in our bones: this life is not all there is.

Logic marches down the road of certainty. It analyzes the present and graphs the trajectory of more of the same. Hope defies inevitability by making room for new possibilities. Hope recognizes that something new, something better, can emerge.

Aretha Franklin died last week. As the daughter of a preacher, she grew up singing gospel songs and never lost her love for God. Pancreatic cancer silenced her voice here on earth, but I suspect she has taken her place in the heavenly choir. And despite the fact that none of us can sing like the Queen of Soul, there is a spot in that choir waiting for us.

NOTES

1. Dudley Clendinen, "The Good Short Life," *The New York Times*, July 10, 2011.
2. Jeffrey M. Pehler, "Ashes to Ashes, but First a Nice Pine Box," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2014.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Composer of Creation and Weaver of the World, we give thanks for the precious gift of life.
We are especially grateful for family and friends
who love us even when we are difficult to love,
who steady us when our knees become weak,
who encourage us to keep forging ahead when the path before us is steep,
and who are unafraid to mix their tears with ours when we grieve.

Gracious God, we give thanks for those
who rejoice with us in times of celebration,
who listen to our stories – even if they have heard them before,
who give us reasons to laugh and to smile
who warm our hearts and remind us how beautiful life can be.

Yet, we know that our time on earth is limited, so we join the psalmist in praying, "Teach us to count our days so that we may gain a wise heart."

God, do not let us forget that we do not have all of the time in the world to do what we need to do. Prompt us to write the letter, to make the call, to send the gift, to take the trip, to extend the forgiveness, to visit the lonely, to confront the injustice, to fulfill the dreams.

Everlasting God, grant us the assurance that you are a God of resurrection and new dawns so that we may live our days in hope. And never let us forget that in life and in death, we belong to you, and nothing will ever separate us from your never-ending love.

In the name of the resurrected one, we join our voices and pray as he taught us to pray, saying, **"Our Father..."**