



“What Would You Do?”

Scripture – Matthew 21:1-9, Matthew 27:27-31

Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, March 25, 2018

What would you do if you knew you had only two years to live? (Travel to see some special places?)

Omid Safi is now 45 years old, but he vividly remembers an incident when he was 13. His parents were giving a party and had invited a number of friends. In the middle of the party, Omid started feeling queasy as if he had eaten something awful. He went into the bathroom, became sick and then he washed his face. When he gazed into mirror, he noticed that suddenly his face was covered with pimples. He thought to himself, “That’s weird.” He knew that teenagers get pimples, but he did not think they appeared all at once.

He rejoined the party and remembers his parents standing in the middle of the room being gracious hosts. His father was surveying the room, making sure everyone had something to eat or drink. His glance came across Omid’s face and kept moving past him to check on the guests. But then, his father’s neck whiplashed and he returned to stare at his son. His smile disappeared and the color drained out of his face. He walked quickly toward Omid and examined him. He turned to his wife and said, “Omid and I are going for a drive. Please carry on.”

They left the party and got in the car, and his father started driving toward the children’s hospital where he was the head of pediatrics. In addition to being a pediatrician, his father was fascinated with rare and exotic diseases. He would study the diseases that only one in ten million would catch.

Years earlier he had read about an unusual form of meningitis that could stay dormant in a person’s nervous system for years. At some point, it would become active and attack the spinal cord and brain. The sign of its activation? Pimples suddenly appearing on a person’s face. From the time the pimples appear, one has only a few hours to receive a body full of powerful antibiotics. If that does not happen, the likelihood of surviving is miniscule. His father recognized the symptoms of this rare and lethal disease he had read about years earlier.

When they reached the hospital, they went immediately to the emergency room. The father sat next to his son’s bed, held his hand and asked him this question: If you have only two hours to live, what would you like to do? Can you imagine asking your child this question?

Omid wanted to talk to his mother, have a slice of chocolate cake, and pray. He went in and out of consciousness. He remembers his mother appearing next to his bed praying. Every nurse in the hospital and every member of the cleaning staff, all of whom loved his father for his kindness toward them, were praying for Omid. Throughout the night, his father’s question kept surfacing in Omid’s mind: If you have only two hours to live, what would you do?

The morning came and he remembers his first sensations – relief at being alive, and then joy. Overwhelming, heart-bursting joy. Joy for breathing; joy for seeing the sun shine through the window; joy for feeling the texture of the sheets around him; joy for seeing the face of his father.

He marveled, too. What if his father had not been a pediatrician? What if he had not been intrigued by exotic diseases? What if they had not had that party and his father had worked late that night?

Over the years, he has pondered how that night and the next morning forever changed for him what it means to be alive. Today, he asks his students: What would you do if you had two years to live? The answers usually are about traveling some place they've always dreamt of going or some thrill-seeking adventure like bungee-jumping.

Then, he asks them what they would do if they knew they only had two hours to live, and the answers change radically. No more Italy or Hawaii or bungee-jumping. There is usually a deep silence in the room and then one-by-one they say,

“I would want to see my mom and tell her how much I love her.”

“I would love to be with my dad and say, ‘I’m sorry for that whole period from ages 12 to 18.’”

“I would want to be with my true love and hold her hand and look into her eyes.”

When people are asked what they would do if they only a brief time to live, they talk about love and tenderness and forgiveness.¹

Today is the beginning of Holy Week; the time when Jesus knew he had only a few days to live. Our first Scripture reading reminds us that Jesus carefully calculated his entry into Jerusalem to occur a handful of days before the Passover Feast when pilgrims swelled the city to five times its normal size. Jesus selected this precise moment because this was the religious festival when Jews celebrated God liberating them from slavery in Egypt. Now that they lived under the oppressive regime of Rome, they dreamt of liberation. The people longed for the Messiah to drive out the Romans and become the King of the Jews. Pilate entered the city from the west, Jesus entered from the east. Pilate came to control the crowds, Jesus came to liberate the people.

The followers of Jesus shouted “Hosanna!” which does not mean “Hooray” or “Alleluia!” It means “save us” or “deliver us.” And when they called him “Son of David,” their legendary king and mightiest military leader, they very publicly announced their allegiance not to Caesar, but to Jesus; not to Rome, but to the Kingdom of God.

While this event is ancient history, followers of Jesus have often faced a similar situation. When a political leader or party is at odds with the way of Jesus, we must decide which we will follow. The integrity of our faith is always at stake.

What would you do if you knew you had only a handful of days to live?

Jesus was determined to seek justice through religious and political protest. First, he conducted his revolutionary parade in which his followers shouted, “Save us!” Then, he went to the temple and declared that it was to be a house of prayer, but the leaders had transformed it into a den of robbers. The next few days he spent teaching, and on Thursday, he ate the Passover Feast with his 12 disciples.

According to the Gospel of John, he washed their feet – a humble act generally performed by a servant. It was a visual and experiential example of how he wanted his followers to carry on after he was gone. To underscore the

symbolism of what he did, he spelled it out in unmistakable terms. He said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you.” Surmising that he had only hours to live, Jesus bequeathed them with the essence of his life and teachings – love one another.

Within hours, hostile henchmen would seize him in the Garden of Gethsemane and march him off to be interrogated, first by the high priest and council, then Pilate. Pilate sought to discern whether Jesus was a relatively harmless spiritual leader who was at odds with the Jewish religious establishment, or a potentially dangerous political insurgent challenging the authority of Rome. Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus is reported to have replied with the ambiguous, “You say so.”

Our second reading describes what happened after Pilate sentenced him. Soldiers stripped Jesus and put a scarlet robe on him. They fashioned a crown of thorns and shoved it onto his head. They knelt before him and taunted him, shouting, “Hail, King of the Jews!” After mocking him, they led him through the city and out a city gate to Golgotha, the place of execution.

The most troubling issue for the early followers of Jesus was that he was not a mighty Messiah who conquered with unprecedented force. He did not defeat the occupying Roman army or wipe away the economic system that kept the majority impoverished. Instead, he was taunted, tortured, and executed.

One of Christianity’s core convictions is that Jesus is the supreme revelation of God. More than any other, Jesus revealed God’s character. Jesus did not divulge God’s nature by stepping off the cross and defeating the dark powers. Instead, he was crucified.

What he revealed was not an omnipotent autocrat with absolute authority, but one who suffers the pain of the world. Instead of unbridled power, Jesus disclosed God’s character as suffering love – a love so radical and so unnerving that he even refused to stop loving those who were killing him. In Jesus, God felt the intense pain of innocent suffering.

Rather than declaring that God demanded a human sacrifice before being willing to forgive sin, the crucifixion of Jesus revealed that the Creator is so bound up with the creation that the Creator cannot help but feel the pain of the world. God feels the pain of each victim of terrorism, each victim of war, each victim of abuse, prejudice, bullying, and disease.

God does not love the world in general or in some vague sort of way. God’s love is very specific. God loves you in the unique situation of your life.

What would you do if you knew your time was almost out? For Jesus, the answer was to love with passion. He loved his followers and he even loved his enemies so much that he asked God to extend mercy to them. Jesus loved to the very end.

What would you do if you knew you had only a short time to live? Why wait until then?

NOTES

1. Omid Safi, “What I Did When I Thought I Had Two Hours to Live,” February 7, 2018.

Prayers of the People ~ Barbara Stratton

Dear Father in Heaven,

Please hear us while we pray.

Thank you for the many blessings in our lives.

Thank you for the joy of new born babies, for the laughter of children, for the warmth of friendship.

Thank you for this Church – for the beauty of this sanctuary, for the artistry of the stained glass windows which surround us.

Thank you for our ministers, and staff, who so ably and faithfully lead us and serve us.

Thank you for the freedom to worship openly, to proclaim your word without fear of government shutdown or imprisonment.

Thank you for sunshine after stormy days, for daffodils that survive snowfall.

We have so much to be thankful for – and yet we come to you with burdens on our hearts.

We pray for those who have lost loved ones and ache with loneliness for those who are gone. We pray that you comfort them, and send them angels to embrace them, to hold their hands, and give them strength and courage to go on.

We pray for those who are sick – both emotionally and physically. We pray that you give them hope, and healing, and wholeness.

We pray for those who face financial struggles; who are hungry; who are homeless. We pray that you help them find partners who will support them, feed them, house them, and direct them to pathways which change their lives.

We pray for all of us in this uncertain world – where wars rage, and there are threats of war, where gun violence is prevalent, where truth seems subjective, where there is an intolerance for people of different backgrounds, or religions or sexual identities, and where political divisiveness tears apart families and friends. We pray that you help us find ways to talk to each other, to find common ground, and work together for justice and peace.

As we trace the steps of Jesus during this Holy Week, let us be mindful of the new commandment he gave his disciples in the upper room at the Last Supper – “that you love one another even as I have loved you”.

Dear Lord, we pray that you help us follow Christ’s example: that no matter our differences, and disagreements, to lead with love.

AMEN.