

“The Building Blocks of Belief:
We Believe in Life Everlasting

John 11:17-27

J. Howard Olds

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I would like to begin this sermon with a few rhetorical questions. In your heart give truthful answers. Are you living or merely surviving? When you get to where you are going, where will you be? Living is a thing you do, now or never, which do you do? Would anybody here like to live forever?

On this Memorial Day weekend, I would like to talk about life: meaningful life, abundant life, everlasting life, eternal life. As a pastor, I see life from many perspectives. In the span of one day, I often hold a new born baby, and then walk down the hall to meet with a family about ending life support systems for a loved one. In between hospital visits I see people of all ages, trying to find meaning for their particular lives. Life – what a wonderful, complicated, creative, eternal gift.

GET A LIFE: HERE AND NOW

LIFE IS A GIFT: ENJOY IT!

Jesus said, “*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*” Abundantly means fully, completely, to the max. God likes life. He invented it. It is to the full, flowing, free life that he invites us.

In a Tom Wilson cartoon, the philosopher *Ziggy* says, “Life is a wonderful gift. That is why we call it the present.” One of life’s great challenges is to be awakened to the wonder of it all. I don’t find many people afraid of dying. I find a lot of people afraid of failing to really live.

In the movie, Dead Poet’s Society Robin Williams plays the role of John Keating, a transformational teacher in a rigid, regimented private school. On the first day of Literature class, Keating takes his students down to the school lobby where trophy cases display the photos of earlier graduating classes. “Look at these pictures, boys,” says Keating. “The young men you behold had the same fire in their eyes that you do. They planned to take the world by storm and make something magnificent of their lives. That was over 70 years ago. Now they are all fertilizing daisies. If you will listen, they have a message for you.” As the students gazed at the class photographs, Keating begins whispering, “CARPE DIEM, CARPE DIEM, seize the day, seize

the day.” Life is a gift here and now. Enjoy.

Sometimes it takes a traumatic moment to awaken us to life. Jane Marie Thibault is a professor of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Louisville. Jane is nationally known for her work in clinical gerontology. In her book, *A Deepening Love Affair* Jane writes: “I began seeing life as a gift when I survived a collision with an 18-wheeler on October 2, 1990. After crawling out of my battered car, I wobbled around a field in a daze. What I remember most is being totally aware of the greenness of the grass, the blueness of the sky, a few puffs of cloud overhead, and some birds squawking raucously in the tree. I was alive. What a blessing. What a precious gift everything was at that moment.”

I keep a little carving of St. Francis on my home desk. A friend gave it to me when I was battling cancer. St. Francis is standing with raised head, outstretched arms, and underneath are these words: “Gracias a Dios por un dia lindo.” Thank you God for this beautiful day. Every day is a beautiful day when you are fully alive.

LIFE IS A GIFT: SHARE IT

A young man came running to Jesus one day. He wanted to know, “*What can I do to inherit eternal life?*” Jesus replied, “*Keep the commandments and you will live.*” “*But teacher,*” the young man declared, “*all these I have kept since I was a boy.*” Jesus looked deep into his eyes and loving him said, “*There is one thing left. Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor. Come follow me.*” In deep sadness the young man walked away.

Life is not about getting, gaining, having, thriving, accumulating and arriving. Life is not about me, my, I, I, I. Life is about community and caring, seeking and sharing, loving and being loved.

Mary and Martha had a common lament: “*Lord if you had been here, our brother would not have died.*” Before Jesus could do anything in Bethany he had some explaining to do. His friends wanted to know, ‘Why didn’t you come? How could you be four days late and still on time? We needed you.’ You see, all of us have certain expectations of others. When we are in the tough moments, we expect somebody else to be there. We want our friends to gather around because life is one of those things that you share. A community is where people come together and share each others joys and bear each others burdens. Joys shared are doubled; sorrows shared are halved. Life is a gift, share it.

Harold Kushner wrote: “Each lifetime is like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. For some there are more pieces. For others the puzzle is more difficult to assemble. But know this; you do not have

within yourself all the pieces to your puzzle. Everyone carries with them at least one and probably many pieces to someone else's puzzle."

That is why Jesus said it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for the rich to get into the kingdom of God. It is not that having money is evil. It is that self-sufficiency is stupid. However rich we are, independent we feel, people who need people are the luckiest people in all the world. We are created for community and we belong together supporting, nurturing, and caring for one another.

When we worry that our lives are passing in a parade of trivialities, it is good to find someone in need and help them. Teens who help others are 50% less likely to join gangs, use drugs, or become pregnant. Their grades are better and drop out rates are lower. Of course it works on the other end of the age spectrum as well.

Erik Erikson said people approaching the last chapters of their lives choose between stagnation and generativity. Stagnated people think only about themselves. Generative people invest in the next generation. Get a life here and now. It is God's wonderful and precious gift to you.

GET A LIFE: THEN AND THERE

There is a resurrection for you. The Christian view of immortality is unique to our religion. It is grounded in the simple promise of Jesus Christ and supported by his followers who were witnesses to his resurrection.

Jesus said: *"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and whosoever believes in me shall never die."* And then he says to Martha, *"Do you believe this?"* What about you Jim, Jenny, Daniel, Denise? Do you believe? It's a soul-searching question.

Resurrection means more than survival of the soul, the continuation of influence, the power of memory. It means individual, recognizable, developmental life of the body and soul for eternity.

Huber Mates, a teacher and journalist, was imprisoned in 1959 when Castro tried to destroy the Church in Cuba. A letter Huber smuggled out of prison to his wife and children contained these words: "I know that I will die in prison. I am sad not to see you again. But I am at peace. They have swords, we have songs."

The people of the resurrection have songs to sing.

In the bulb there is a flower, in the seed an apple tree, in cocoons a hidden treasure, butterflies

will soon be free. In the snow and cold of winter there's a spring that waits to be. If resurrection rings through all of nature, could there not be a resurrection for me?

Sing with all the saints of glory, sing the resurrection song. Death and sorrow earth's dark story, to the former days belong. All around the clouds are breaking, soon the storms of life shall cease; In God's likeness we awaking know the everlasting peace. If God has the power to raise Christ from the dead, could he not also provide a resurrection for me?

Just as 3 x 3 will always be 9, just as love is stronger than hate, just as goodness is more lasting than evil, just as no trouble is immortal, so there is inherent in the "now" a quality of life that is eternal.

Golf pro, Paul Azinger, put it this way while he battled cancer, "We are not in the land of the living going to the land of the dying. We are in the land of the dying going to the land of the living." There is a resurrection for you. Get a life.

THERE IS A PLACE FOR YOU

Jesus said, "*I go to prepare a place for you. That where I am there you may be also.*" Everybody needs a place. Everybody needs a place to be. Henri Nouwen said, "Heaven will be like coming home from a long trip where people are waiting to meet you at the terminal anxious to see your travel slides."

There is a land that is fairer than day. The longer I live I find it not so far away. For the Father waits over the way, to prepare me a dwelling place there.

Bishop Earl Hunt once wrote: "In my long life I've had many exciting adventures. I have crossed the ocean numerous times, and have traveled around the world. But I am awaiting the greatest adventure of all, the journey into the land from which no traveler has ever returned."

Once upon a time a father promised his son a special weekend camping trip. On the night before their departure, the child got so excited he could not manage to sleep. He lay in bed awhile, then wandered into his parents' room and awakened his dad to ask, "Is it morning yet?" "Not yet," said his dad as he sent the boy back to bed. The child did the best he could but in a little while, he wandered back to his father's bed and shaking his dad awake said, "I'm so excited thinking about the things we'll do, there is no way I can sleep." But the father insisted and the boy went back to bed. This time the boy did fall asleep. But way before morning, he was wide awake again. Once more he shook his dad

awake and said, "Dad, I just want to thank you for all the fun we're going to have tomorrow."
With that the dad let the child climb into his bed.

When I try to wrap my small mind around the mysteries of heaven, when I try to put into words that which no words can begin to describe, sometimes I just want to fall on my knees and say, "My heavenly Father, I want to thank you for all the fun we will have in heaven. I can only imagine what it will be by your side. I can only imagine what my eyes will see when your face is before me. Thank you God, for what eternal life is going to be. I can only imagine."

We believe in the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting. Eternal life here and eternal life forever. We believe, Lord, help us when it's hard to believe.