

Empowering God's Ministries Together:  
The Power of a Single Life  
II Corinthians 6:3-13

November 7, 2004  
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My particular profession causes me to spend a lot of time in the cemetery. The message on tombstones, especially in older cemeteries, never ceases to fascinate me. Some are funny: "Here lies my wife, here let her lie, now she's at peace and so am I." Some are sad: "Here lies the body of a man who died, nobody mourned, nobody cried, how he lived, how he fared, nobody knows, nobody cared." Some are tender: "Gracie Allen and George Burns Together Again." Some are instructive: "My dear friends, as you pass by, as you are now, so once was I, as I am now, you soon must be, prepare yourselves to follow me."

On every tombstone there is a birth date and a death date and a little dash separating the two. None of us had much to do with our birth. It just happened to us. We may have little to do with our death. Time, like an ever rolling stream, bears all who breathe away. We have everything to do with that little dash, which symbolizes our life. And that's what I'd like to talk about today on our way to Holy Communion. **CONSIDER THE POWER OF A SINGLE LIFE.**

I've just finished reading Tony Hendra's best seller Father Joe. Tony Hendra is a humorist and satirist. He tries to change the world with laughter. But in this true story of Father Joe, he paints a picture of a compassionate, caring, loving monk who lives in Quarr Abbey off the southern coast of England.

Tony first met Father Joe at age fourteen when whisked there by an irate husband who caught his wife in an inappropriate involvement with Tony. In that place of judgment, Tony found a forty year friendship with Father Joe that anchored his life through drugs and disbelief, through failures and disappointments, and finally to a discovery of his true calling as a husband and father.

Much to Tony's surprise, Father Joe was that kind of mentor to many others, including Princess Di. Joe was a holy chameleon. To me he was irreverent and secular. To others he was an intensely spiritual guide, to others a mild, but unyielding disciplinarian. To some he was a father. To some he was a mother. He always did what was practical and appropriate for the person he was with. There weren't two kinds of people in the world for Joe, not three, not ten, just people. He was a prophet of the possible. He soothed the damaged, nurtured and tortured, and reassured the imperfect. He was the living, breathing proof that love will teach you everything you really need to know, if you will only listen. The power of a single life.

Ganga Stone, founder of "In God's Love, We Deliver" provides about three thousand AIDS victims in New York City two hot gourmet meals a day. It all started fifteen years ago when Ganga was working as a volunteer for hospice. One day she was delivering some groceries to a thirty-two year old actor named Richard when he grabbed a packet of pasta and threw it on the floor in disgust. What good are groceries when you can't get out of the bed to prepare them?

Ganga went to a local deli and brought back a healthy, gourmet meal and sat down by his bed and helped him eat it. When the meal was over, she began the process that today has an annual budget of 6 million dollars, feeding thousands of AIDS victims in New York City—the power of one single life. “This is not social service,” says Ganga to an interviewer one day. “This is Divine service.”

It's All Saints Sunday. I suppose all Christendom can agree that Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ and author of most of the New Testament, was a saint. Suppose Paul applied for a staff position at Brentwood United Methodist Church. Would we have second thoughts about hiring him? He was well educated, but he was also overly zealous and often had trouble getting along with colleagues. He started a lot of churches, but he never stayed very long in any one place. He caused a lot of riots and spent a good deal of time in jail. Paul was too liberal for some and much too spiritual for others. He could hold his own in a debate with the smartest, but chose to know nothing among the people but Jesus Christ and him crucified. He had a thorn in his flesh, a fire in his soul, and a calling that convinced the world of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He single handedly brought Christendom to the Western World.

Rejoice in God's saints, today and all days  
A world without saints, forgets how to praise  
In loving, in living, they prove it is true  
The way of self-giving, Lord, leads us to you.

When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth and gave this long list of what he had been through, he came to the conclusion with just a couple of statements. I have poured my heart out to you; I've held absolutely nothing back. I have given you everything I've got and now my dear Corinthians, as I have opened my heart to you, OPEN WIDE YOUR HEARTS ALSO. Will you open wide your hearts today? Open-hearted people know how to love and be loved.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken.” If you want to make sure of keeping your heart in tact, give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully and surround it with hobbies and little luxuries, avoid all entanglements, lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, aimless, it will change; it will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, irredeemable and hard. Open-hearted people know how to love and to be loved.

If this is not a place where tears are understood,  
Then where can I go to cry?  
If this is not a place where my spirit can take wings,  
Then where shall I go to fly?  
If this is not a place where my questions can be asked,  
Then where shall I go to seek?  
And if this is not a place where my heart cry can be heard,  
Where, tell me where, shall I go to speak?

If we want to leave this earth a better place than we found it, we will need to open the doors of our hearts. Open-hearted people do not live on the defensive. They have no need to hold back, be on guard, act cautiously. They are free to live and to love, to rejoice and to care, to forgive and renew, to believe and move on.

Open-hearted people seize the day. They possess the power to see it through. Edison didn't give up on the light bulb even though his helpers seriously doubted the thing would ever work. Luther refused to back down when the Church doubled her fist and clenched her teeth in efforts to keep him quiet. Michelangelo kept pounding and painting regardless of negative put downs. The Gaithers made room in their busy schedule for a scared, young soprano named Sandi Patti who would one day thrill Christendom with "We Shall Behold Him." People didn't stop believing in me when I faltered and fell by the way. I thank God for people like that. They were open-hearted folk who were willing to take me in their souls even though I had disappointed and hurt them. OPEN WIDE YOUR HEARTS. Open hearted people have the power to see it through. Open-hearted people seize the moment. They don't live in yesterday or tomorrow, they live now.

Know the value of every moment. He was standing with his sister-in-law and going through her things selecting items for his wife's final dressing by the undertaker. He pulled a slip from the bottom drawer and handed it to her sister saying, "Here, use this." It was exquisite silk, handmade, trimmed with a cobweb of lace; the price tag still on it was astronomical. Through his tears he looked at his sister-in-law and said, "Joan bought this the first time we went to New York about eight or nine years ago. She never wore it. She was saving it for a special occasion. Well, I guess this is a special occasion." Ever since I read that story I've asked myself, "What is a special occasion?" Is now a special occasion?

I don't know about you, but I have stopped living on the premise of 'one of these days I am going to get around to it' and 'some day it might be different than it is now.' I don't know about tomorrow and you don't either. I only know that I have this one sliver of time and what I do with it makes all the difference.

Every day is a special occasion. As Paul says, "Now is the accepted time. Today is the day of salvation." If there is any good I can do, any kindness I can show, any difference I can make, let me neither defer it nor neglect it, for I will not pass this way again.

As I have learned to seize the day, it's not the doing, going, accomplishing that makes a difference. It's the being, loving, reflecting, relating, praying, living that has brought the deepest meaning. It is that connectedness between here and there that the Church has called the Communion of the Saints.

Open the doors of our hearts, Lord, open the doors of our hearts.  
We want to love others, as we learn to love you.  
In the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.











