

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Fifth Sunday of Lent: March 21, 2021

“Living life to the Fullest”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to our last Sunday in Lent. Liturgically we have come full circle. We are at the beginning of spring when those seeds and bulbs spring back to life, however in our liturgical cycle we have Jesus talking about his death.

Let's look at where we have been so far. We had the birth of Jesus, the visit from the magi, the young Jesus in the Temple. We have had Jesus baptized and tempted, he has also become the healer, the parable teller, and even raised Lazarus from the dead. And here we are, Jesus tells us he is coming to the end of his life. This is the full circle of the human story.

Today Jesus is asking us whether or not we have actually lived our lives to their fullest. Have we seen God in the world around us, in our neighbors and in ourselves? Over the last month we have read and heard the commandments over and over again, but do they mean anything to us? Are God's commandments written on our hearts, and if they are, are we living life to its fullest? Death is guaranteed, but life, well, that is up to us. After a year of pandemic lockdown you may have wondered if you have lived your life to the fullest this past year.

Whenever I read this scripture a strange movie scene comes to mind, probably most of you are familiar with it, so bear with me. I don't know how many of you have seen the movie “Fight Club” but there is a scene in it that rings truth to this Gospel.

The main character, Tyler, played by Brad Pitt, at one point finds himself and his unnamed friend played by Edward Norton in a small grocery store where a young man is tending business. As the plot of the movie is about reclaiming manhood and putting people on the spot and other various philosophies, this scene has our character Tyler abruptly attacking this young grocery clerk, dragging him out to the back alley of the store, in fear for his life.

Tyler roughs up the young clerk who is crying and pleading for his life, expecting to be killed at any moment. Then Tyler raises the question about the quality of the young man's life. He asks him if he is content working at a grocery store. He continues to taunt the young man, questioning if this grocery store work is what he is really meant to do. He asks him about what he dreamt of becoming when he was younger and challenges him as to why he did not follow those dreams. The young man through his fear and tears replies that he always wanted to be a veterinarian, but admits the work was too hard, and the monetary cost too high, and he settled into his grocery clerk job to survive.

After more physical roughness, Tyler allows the young man to flee, with the threat that he will come back to see if the young clerk changes his mind about his career now that he has experienced the frailty of life. Tyler then turns to his friend and states that tomorrow will be the young clerk's best day ever. Because he realized that death was so close and he escaped, the young man's breakfast will taste the best it has ever been, the sky will be bluer, the sun brighter and there is a good possibility the man will find a way to go back to school and fulfill his dream. One that he had sold out for convenience.

To the extent we avoid death we avoid life. The degree to which we are afraid to die is the degree to which we are afraid to fully live. Every time we avoid and turn away from death, we proclaim it stronger than God, more real than life, and the ultimate victor.

The unspoken fear and avoidance of death underlies all of our “what if” questions.” What if I fail, lose, fall down? What if I get hurt? What if I don’t get what I want? What if I lose that one I most need and love the most? Every “what if” question separates and isolates us from life, God, one another, and ourselves. It keeps us from bearing fruit. We are just a single grain of wheat. We might survive, but we aren’t really alive.

Jesus did not ask to be saved from death. He is unwilling to settle for survival when the fullness of God’s life is before him. He knows that in God’s world strength is found in weakness, victory looks like defeat, and life is born of death. This is what allowed him to ride triumphantly into Jerusalem, a city that would soon condemn and kill him. That is what allows us to ride triumphantly through life. Triumph doesn’t mean that we get our way or that we avoid death. It means death is a gateway, not a prison, and the beginning, not the end.

As we finish up our Lenten journey, and also as we slowly re-enter the world after the pandemic, my question to you is, are you ready to live your life to the fullest? This doesn’t mean taking silly risks, and by no means take your mask off, but we, like the young grocery clerk, have seen death. We have been threatened by the idea that simply going to the store might mean the end of us.

But what did that realization mean to you? It seems as a country we have come to realize that every human being and every job, even the ones we thought were not important, are actually essential. We have found that our family, friends and neighbors, even the ones we don’t like, have meaning in our lives in ways we never imagined. We have learned the fickleness of crowd thinking, and the power that words have to either hurt or heal.

This is not unlike the experience of Jesus’ followers. As we head into Holy week, our crowd will change from the cheering loyal worshipers that recognize Jesus as Lord, to the

mob who will cry out “crucify him.” And this too can happen to us as we slowly attempt to go back out into the world.

It was easy to focus on our faith and our relationship with Jesus while we were locked in our homes, as our worlds grew smaller with less distractions, but what now? Our journey is not unlike the young grocery clerk. In fact, it is also very similar to those on the sidelines of our scripture today. In a small way, we have all experienced a death. A death of the way things used to be.

Like our young grocery clerk, this Easter although different and with new precautions in place, may very well feel like the best Easter ever - because we have tasted death. We may feel truly resurrected after a year of lockdown. But what are you going to do with that freedom? Is that relationship with Jesus that was so easily found in confinement going to be with you and inform your future way of being, once there are outward distractions?

We are grains of wheat. Those grains will enter the earth and die as we all must. And if placed in fertile ground those grains, those tiny seeds, will become the bread that feeds the future.

I believe we are asked today about whether we are living our lives to the fullest. Are we creating fertile ground that when our earthly lives are over, we will be remembered as pillars of faith, seekers of justice, and a people of compassion. Will we be known as Christians because of our love, because of the example of our lives?

How good will your Easter breakfast be? How blue will the sky be? How bright the sun? And more importantly, how great the fruit of your life? Amen