

A LIFE NOT IN VAIN

Scriptures: I Corinthians 15:12-22, 51-58

I shared this story at the memorial service we had yesterday for Thora Hess. It is one of my favorite stories. A man on his way home from work stopped to watch his son's Little League baseball game. When he got to the game he asked one of the boys, "What's the score?" The boy said, "We're behind 14-0." The father looked at him and said, "You don't sound very discouraged." The boy replied, "Why should I be? We haven't gotten up yet."

Sometimes it feels like we are behind 14-0, and not just because we are worried about losing a game. You could also be worried about losing a job or a home or something even more important. Harold Kushner, a Jewish rabbi, tells of a distraught man who came to talk to him. This is from his book *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*. The man said,

Two weeks ago, for the first time in my life I went to the funeral of a man my own age. I didn't know him well, but we worked together, talked to each other from time to time, had kids about the same age. He died suddenly over the weekend. A bunch of us went to the funeral, each of us thinking, "It could just as easily have been me." That was two weeks ago. They have already replaced him at the office. I hear his wife is moving out of state to live with her parents. Two weeks ago he was working fifty feet away from me, and now it's as if he never existed. It's like a rock falling into a pool of water. For a few seconds, it makes ripples in the water, and then the water is the same as it was before, but the rock isn't there anymore. Rabbi, I've hardly slept at all since then. I can't stop thinking that it could happen to me, that one day it *will* happen to me, and a few days later I will be forgotten as if I had never lived. Shouldn't a man's life be more than that? (p. 20)

One of the most eloquent books of the Bible is a small book buried in the middle of the Old Testament called Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is a Greek word that means "preacher," only this preacher is not like any preacher you have ever heard. He begins his sermon with these words: "Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." I wouldn't have the nerve to start my sermon like that. But in the second chapter it gets worse. He says,

What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?
And I said to myself that this is also is vanity. For there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. ...
So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind (Ecclesiastes 2:15-17).

That's uplifting, don't you think? Every year at the beginning of Lent we have an Ash Wednesday service where people come forward and receive a mark of ashes on their forehead. As we put the ashes on their forehead we say these words: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." A couple of years ago after the Ash Wednesday service, one of our church members, Andrea Reid, wrote a poem. She gave me permission to share it. It's called "From Dust to Dust."

The thin layer of dust
my finger skims from
the bookshelf
only confirms what
I already knew:
I'm no housekeeper.
From dust I was made,
to dust I'll return,
so perhaps I'll just
help my soul along
more quickly, linking arms
with the other souls
that have taken permanent
residence, apparently,
in my living room.
But before I join them,
arm strewn casually
around Woolf, knee-joint
dangling precariously
off Alexie, face wedged
tightly between Irving and Ivans,
I'd like to know
why I'm here at all.

If in the turn of a single page
I'll be forgotten tomorrow,
wiped casually aside
by someone else's index finger,
what do I do now—right now—
to prove I have lived,
am living,
want to live,
forever?

In our first scripture reading Paul says, "If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain." In other words, if this life is all there is, we're behind 14-0.

But what if God has not gotten up yet? Listen again to our second scripture lesson. Paul says, "Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." Sometimes people take this to mean that life here and now really does not matter, except as a kind of qualifying heat to make into the next round. But notice what the apostle Paul says at the end of this chapter—verse 58: "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

Because Jesus rose from the dead, the feeble things we do to serve him in this life are not in vain. They are not lost or forgotten, ever! The resurrection is not just about life after death; it is about giving meaning to our lives before we die. Because of the resurrection what we do to serve God here and now can have eternal significance.

There are, of course, other gods you can serve—gods of wealth, gods of power, gods of prestige—but these other gods will one day disappear. The job you have been counting on will end, maybe sooner rather than later. The house you’ve built will one day be torn down. The reputation you have built up will one day be forgotten. If you are playing for the gods of wealth, power, or prestige, you are playing for the wrong team, even if right now you are ahead. Because it won’t last. It won’t last. One day the game will be over, and when you walk off the field for the last time who will care what the score is?

Unless, there is still another inning to be played. That is what Jesus brings to the game: the possibility that the life you live for God, the things you do to serve Jesus and show his love to the world—there things are not lost or forgotten. They are not in vain. They are incorporated into the life yet to be revealed through Jesus Christ.

I have known doctors and nurses who were heartbroken over losing a patient. They told me that their efforts were in vain. But Easter means that their efforts were not in vain. Because one day all that we do to bring healing and hope into other people’s lives, even if they die, will be fulfilled in the greater healing God still has in store for us through Jesus Christ.

I have also known Christian parents whose children went astray. They were heartbroken. They felt that all their efforts to raise them and guide them, and to nurture their relationship to God had been in vain. But Easter means it is not in vain, because God is not finished with them yet.

I have known people who for years tried to be reconciled with their parents or another family member and who were rebuffed. I have known employers who went out of their way to help someone get a job, only to have that person quit. I have known workers who put in decades of faithful service to their company, only to have it go bankrupt, wiping out not only their job but their retirement. I have known pastors, Sunday School teachers, family members, and neighbors who have worked and prayed for years that someone they care about would believe and experience God’s love in Jesus Christ but who never showed the slightest interest. These people may think their labor is in vain. But it is not. It is not! Because God still has another at bat.

In my files I have a prayer written by a young boy named Daniel. This is Daniel’s prayer: “Dear God, thank you for my parents, my sister, and for my grandma and grandpa. They are all real warm and special. I forgive you for my brother Jeff. I guess you didn’t finish working on him.”

Do you hear the good news in that prayer? God is not finished yet. God still has another at bat. And that means the things we do to serve God here and now, even the things that seemed like they failed—those things may yet play a role in God’s work that we did not expect, a role that will be remembered and celebrated forever.

- Ken Onstot, April 12, 2009