

“What Lasts?”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
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Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

[The Apostle Paul said,]

²¹ *Because for me, living serves Christ and dying is even better.*

²² *If I continue to live in this world, I get results from my work.*

²³ *But I don't know what I prefer.*

*I'm torn between the two because I want to leave this life and be with Christ,
which is far better.*

²⁴ *However, it's more important for me to stay in this world for your sake.*

Let us pray... O God,

Life is so fragile and brief, but for however long we have,

you have given us the resources for what makes for an eternity with you.

As we seek to be your people, you provide us with lives of purpose
to find out what lasts...

Amen

Two weekends ago, we were faced with a Category 5 hurricane and –

even though it was predicted to become a Category 2 by the time it got here,
didn't it occur to you: “This could be it” – this could have been The End.

It was the end for more than 30 people in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina,
and more than 40 people in the Caribbean

directly and indirectly because of Hurricane Irma.

The entire population of the island of Barbuda – more than 1,600 people,
were evacuated to Antigua before the storm.

Though no one was reported to have been killed there, it was learned afterwards that
the hurricane destroyed 95% of their buildings and homes;

So, this island is now unoccupied for the first time in 300 years!

Since then, Hurricane Maria brought death and destruction back to the Caribbean,
this time hitting Puerto Rico and bringing down power for the whole island.

Also, an earthquake with an epicenter at a town SE of Mexico City,

killed more than 300 people and destroyed businesses, schools, and homes.

Earthquakes and tornados strike with little warning,

but it is still hard to know whether or not to take a chance
with the onset of a hurricane – fight or flight?

Do you stock up on water, candles, foods, and propane and wait it out –
with the possibility of a Category 3 Hurricane tearing off your roof,
no matter how well you prepared?

Or do you run for it – and risk being caught out in the open
by 100+ mph winds and floodwaters?

Willard, p.2

Under such circumstances of an advancing storm, a person could lose everything that they worked for over the course of their lives –
and even lose life itself, in an instant!

Then, there are the ‘storms’ of life that strike in the form of debt, illness, the infirmity of advanced years, and the desolation of loneliness;
and sometimes we have a warning and sometimes we don’t.

So then, what – if anything, lasts? We don’t often talk about the time to come –
and what lasts. Maybe we should...

I suppose there are different ways of looking at that question.

Having a “last will & testament” helps distribute the *things* that are your possessions and minimize confusion
when you no longer have a say.

Having a “living will & advanced directive” lets others know what you would want in a situation should you become incapacitated
and unable to communicate.

So, for any of us, things don’t last whether that is our possessions –
or even our bodies.

So, what lasts in any meaningful way?

Jesus had something to say about this in his Sermon on The Mount:

We can’t trust that we can secure our “treasures” on Earth –
“where moth and rust destroy, and thieves can break in and steal.”

Instead, Jesus told us to store our treasures in Heaven

“...for where your heart is, that is where your treasure will be.”

Regarding those spiritual ‘treasures’, our faith tradition as Christians
does speak to the big questions of life.

Christianity is not the only religion or belief system or philosophy,
that offers answers, but Christianity does address social ills and peace,
fears and hopes about life and death, and life after death...

Our ‘treasures’ include a concept of God reinterpreted from the Hebrew scriptures,
and proclaimed in the early writings of the apostles,
and re-enacted and experienced through the traditions of the Church,
that have survived the tests of time – and are *still* subject to testing.

Our greatest treasure has been passed on to us in the form of Good News –
which is what the Greek word for ‘Gospel’ means.

That good news – which we have through the stories of Christ:
specifically, the dramatic narrative and visceral imagery
of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion & resurrection.

That is to say, we are loved by God who forgives us to heal us and –
regardless of our outward circumstances, it’ll be OK in the time to come.

Willard, p.3

At the beginning of my sabbatical, I went to the Grunewald Guild
in the mountains east of Seattle, Washington,
where I was an artist-in-residence for 3 weeks.

Afterwards, I planned to visit Dr. Tom Boomershine in Dayton, OH,
who is a scholar, author, and founder of the Network of Biblical Storytellers.

He wrote a book on the last three chapters of the Gospel of Mark
which describe the events Jesus' crucifixion & resurrection.

So, I figured this would be the inspiration for my project at the Grunewald.

Using Dr. Boomershine's book as a reference, I paraphrased Mark 14-16
using a Greek-English interlinear text, and put into the form
of 9 readings, along with 9 drawings I did, to symbolize principal events;
The text & images together will be used for our next Holy Thursday service.
I posted my paraphrased notes – 30 in all, and the drawings on the wall of my studio,
and invited the staff to come take a look at my work.

It was the first time I grappled with the story of Jesus' crucifixion & resurrection,
to make it my own, to tell – and also to see in that story, the pain and joy
of my 20 years of ministry

Vonda Drees, who is a co-director there, gave her immediate impression –
even giving my work a title: "The greater depths of love".

That is to say, the passion of Christ's crucifixion & resurrection,
demonstrates the 'greater depths' of God's love for us.

When I eventually went to see Tom & Amelia Boomershine,
I stayed for a couple days, and we talked about how the 'end times',
applied to the early Church under Roman domination –
and specifically, the persecution of Christians by Emperor Nero.

It is believed that Nero bypassed the due process of 'eminent domain'
for an engineering project, by conspiring to have a fire set
that destroyed much of Rome – and then he blamed it on Christians.

Among those killed were the apostles, Peter and Paul, the most important leaders
for the Church then and even now nevertheless,
thanks to their letters – also called, epistles.

Though the first Christians expected the Kingdom was on the way –
it still had not shown up yet!

So, they saw a need to collect the stories of those apostles, teachers, storytellers –
and especially, eyewitnesses, so that Jesus' words & deeds would not be lost.

The Gospel of Mark was first, then those of Matthew and Luke, and finally John
which were written to preserve a record meant for future generations
to have the opportunity to meet God through the stories of Christ.

It is through these stories that we can still meet a God who forgives and heals and
teaches and saves humankind from all the powers of this world,

seen and unseen – even a God who carries us through death to life.

Willard, p.4

The early Christians had a purpose bigger than themselves,
aligned with belief in a living God – who loves and serves humankind.
That purpose called for them – and calls for us, to be like such a God, too,
not by dominating others like earthly dictators,
but by loving and serving humankind
as our God loves and serves each one of us.

For us as Christians, to imitate Christ is a way to truly become
who we were created to be.

So the Gospel – the Good News in a single word, is “love” –
the love you do, the love you get, the love you become.
That is what lasts.

Next month, I will attend the 40th Reunion of my West Point class and
will participate in the memorial service for our classmates who passed on.
I will read these words attributed to the Apostle Paul
from 2nd Corinthians 5 :1-4 as they are written in the CEV:

¹Our bodies are like tents that we live in here on earth.

*But when these tents are destroyed,
we know that God will give each of us a place to live.*

*These homes will not be buildings that someone has made,
but they are in heaven and will last forever.*

*² While we are here on earth,
we sigh because we want to live in that heavenly home.*

³ We want to put it on like clothes and not be naked.

*⁴ These tents we now live in are like a heavy burden, and we groan.
But we don't do this just because we want to leave these bodies that will die.
It is because we want to change them for bodies that will never die.*

What I believe that means is this:

Who we are in the time to come,
is defined by the love we devoted ourselves to in this life
and by the love others had for us – however imperfect that may be;
and this essence of who we are will be cloaked by the love of God,
or in other words, we will “put on the Christ”,
as it is written in Romans 13:14.

The Good News then, is that you are loved by God,
expected to love others as you have been loved.

This will be the basis for how we are judged by a generous God
who forgives us by the standard we set for forgiveness –
of which I will speak more next week.

So, it is going to be OK.

Willard, p.5

We have the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John
and their dramatic and even at times, humorous imagery
of 'God with us' as Jesus Christ,
but this should not diminish the significance of those epistles by Paul
and those apostles who guided the first Christian congregations.
Let me close with a familiar text attributed to the Apostle Paul,
the First Epistle to the Corinthians, Chapter 13...

- ¹If I speak in the tongues of [humankind] and of angels, but have not love,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*
- ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love,
I am nothing.*
- ³If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned,
but have not love, I gain nothing.*
- ⁴Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful;
⁵it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice at wrong,
but rejoices in the right.*
- ⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
⁸Love never ends;
as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease;
as for knowledge, it will pass away.*
- ⁹For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect;
¹⁰but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.*
- ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child,
I reasoned like a child; when I became [an adult], I gave up childish ways.*
- ¹²For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then
face to face.
Now I know in part; then
I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.*
- ¹³So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*

Faith, hope, and especially love are what abide with us and embrace us,
now and in the time to come; They are what last.

Amen

Our lesson today from Philippians 1:21-30, the Apostle Paul describes the life of being 'in Christ' – or in Christian community...

[The Apostle Paul said,]

²¹ Because for me, living serves Christ and dying is even better.

²² If I continue to live in this world, I get results from my work.

²³ But I don't know what I prefer.

I'm torn between the two because I want to leave this life and be with Christ, which is far better.

²⁴ However, it's more important for me to stay in this world for your sake.

²⁵ I'm sure of this:

I will stay alive and remain with all of you to help your progress and the joy of your faith,

²⁶ and to increase your pride in Christ Jesus through my presence when I visit you again.

²⁷ Most important, live together in a manner worthy of Christ's gospel.

Do this, whether I come and see you or I'm absent and hear about you.

Do this so that you stand firm, united in one spirit and mind as you struggle together to remain faithful to the gospel.

²⁸ That way, you won't be afraid of anything your enemies do.

Your faithfulness and courage are a sign of their coming destruction and your salvation, which is from God.

²⁹ God has generously granted you the privilege,

not only of believing in Christ but also of suffering for Christ's sake.

³⁰ You are having the same struggle that you saw me face

and now hear that I'm still facing.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Matthew 20:1-16

[Jesus said,]

¹“For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

²After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

³And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place; ⁴and to them he said,

‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’
So they went.

⁵Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same.

⁶And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them,

‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’

⁷They said to him,

‘Because no one has hired us.’

He said to them,

‘You go into the vineyard too.’

⁸And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward,

‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’

⁹And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius.

¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius.

¹¹And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder,

¹²saying,

‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’

¹³But he replied to one of them,

‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?’

¹⁴Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you.

¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’

¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first last.”