

“Great Expectations”

Luke 12:15-23,31, 42-48

Ten Vital Verses—Verse #5

Sunday, July 23, 2017

Covenant Presbyterian Church

In Luke 12 Jesus is speaking with his followers, teaching them about what is important in life. He warns them about greed and selfishness and foolishness. He reminds them that their primary calling is to serve the Kingdom of God. Knowing that we humans can get easily distracted, he cautions them about staying focused, encouraging them to live with integrity.

We need to hear this reading in context, from a time when slavery was widespread and not questioned, at least by those who weren't slaves. Most Bibles have a footnote with verse 46, saying that “cut him into pieces” can also be translated “cut him off.” This makes the reading a bit more palatable.

This teaching sounds a bit harsh, but I think it's one of those times that Jesus used an exaggerated image to make a point. Listen for God's word:

And the Lord said, “Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions.

But if that slave says to himself, ‘My master is delayed in coming,’ and if he begins to beat the other slaves, men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and put him with the unfaithful.

That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

I almost was a heretic this week.

As Presbyterians, we take the Bible very seriously, not literally, but seriously. With our ten week “Vital Verses” series, I have been encouraging you to dig more deeply into the Bible and find a verse or two that really speaks to you, with comfort or even challenge. We are halfway through this series. But for today, I briefly considered using a non-biblical verse as our Vital Verse.

Poet Mary Oliver wrote a poem called “The Summer Day” which talks about black bears, grasshoppers, and prayer, and it concludes with a famous line, which is at the top of your bulletins:

**Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?**

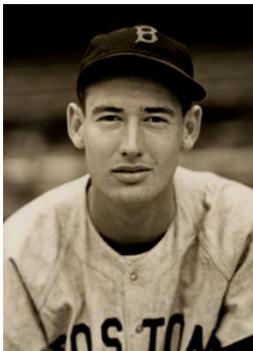
--Mary Oliver

In our gospel reading today, Jesus seems to be asking that same question. He challenges the disciples to avoid worrying too much about food and clothing and “stuff” and he bluntly tells them:

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

He is helping them to make good use of their “precious life,” calling them to live a life of clarity and purpose, to use their gifts and experiences to make a difference.

Do you know anyone who exudes a sense of clarity and purpose? Do you know anyone who really knows what their particular skills and gifts are, and who is really using those skills and gifts? According to author John Updike, baseball player Ted Williams did.



Williams, who played for the Boston Red Sox a long time ago, is the most recent player to bat over .400 in a season, which he did in 1941. Quite a feat. Anyone remember his final batting average that year? Updike wrote that Williams: “radiated, from afar, the hard blue glow of high purpose.”

<http://www.newyorker.com/books/double-take/eighty-five-from-the-archive-john-updike>

Not only did Ted Williams bat .400, but he also won the Triple Crown twice and was named to the All Star team for 17 seasons. For good measure, he was a Marine Corps pilot in WWII and the Korean War.

I can see why John Updike sensed that glow of purpose in Ted Williams.



In my four and half years here in Wisconsin, I've come to appreciate someone else who has a similarly clear sense of high purpose, maybe a green and gold sense of purpose: this guy named Aaron Rodgers.

Watching a gifted athlete perform at his or her peak is a wonderful thing. But imagine what we would think if Aaron Rodgers or Venus Williams, or Jordan Spieth, or Neymar decided that they weren't going to try anymore, that they didn't really care. We'd be sad, and we'd think what a waste of talent.

Coaches and fans have great expectations for the players on the field. And in a similar way, God has great expectations of us, that we would use whatever skills, gifts, and opportunities we have for good.

When you sign up on the Christian team, when you join the church, when you call yourself a church member or a Christian, you're saying that you want to play in the game, you want to make a difference, you want to live a life of purpose.

Our Vital Verse reminds us that God expects great things from us with whatever has been entrusted to our care. In "The Message" version of the Bible we read:

Great gifts mean great responsibilities; greater gifts, greater responsibilities!

As the years go by for me, I have more desire to have that sense of purpose, that desire to not waste time and make the most of every day. I first remember being aware of this after my father died, suddenly when I was just 31 years old.

At his memorial service, the pastor in my home church in West Hartford, CT, read from Psalm 90, a psalm attributed to Moses. The psalm invites reflection on time and life. The two lines that have stayed with me over the years are verse 12, which reads:

**Teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.**

In those words, at the time when my father had died suddenly, I heard a clear calling that life is short and we need to make the most of every day we have.

And the psalm concludes with a prayer for purposefulness in verse 17:

**Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!**

So in the time after my father died, I found a stronger sense of calling to live a purposeful life, to make good use of the time I have. I continue to discover new resolve to make good choices, to take advantage of the opportunities of each day.

And as I learn more about my own privilege—being a white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, US citizen—I feel an even stronger sense that I have to make good use of the time I have. I recognize more clearly each day, that I have been given much, and thus much is expected of me, to make this world a better place, to serve the Kingdom of God.

I really believe that God expects great things from each of us.

Not the same things—none of us is the same. But God expects, God hopes that we would make good use of the time we have, to work for justice, to alleviate suffering, to bring joy, to make God's love real.

But I know it's hard to live with that sense of purpose all the time. We forget and we can get easily distracted. I know I do. Even this very week, as I'm prayerfully pondering this topic of making good use of our time, I found myself spending more time than I'd like to admit poking around social media, playing a game on my phone, checking my email—again.

While it is certainly OK for us to relax and play games or watch TV or whatever, we need to be careful about getting overly distracted or tempted. Too many people get trapped in downward spirals of alcohol or drugs, or greed and indifference, or of thinking too little of themselves.

The truth is, the good news is that we're all beloved children of God, and even if we don't have the skills of Ted Williams or Aaron Rogers, we can do something to make this world a better place.

I want to share three simple things that help keep me on track.

One is being in community with other Christians. When we gather together as Christians, we hear again the call of Jesus, to live for the sake of the Kingdom, to fish for people, to love God and neighbor. In worship, I get renewed. So thanks for coming to church today.

A second help to keep me focused is prayer.

Lead me not into temptation but deliver us from evil
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done

A third thing that helps me stay on track is Scripture, with Vital Verses.

One favorite verse of many people is Psalm 118.24:

This is the day the Lord has made
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

That verse helps me get the day started right, with a sense of drive and direction.

So the big question here today is about the direction of your life. Where are you going? What are you doing with your life?

More bluntly, what will your legacy be? What will people remember about you?

What if you had a chance to re-write your obituary? Many years ago, a man named Alfred got to do that.

Alfred was born in 1833 and over the course of his life, he invented man things, getting over 350 patents, and his most famous invention is dynamite.

In 1888, Alfred's brother died, but somehow word got out incorrectly, and many newspapers published obituaries for Alfred. One headline read: "The merchant of death is dead." And the article described him as a man "who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before..."

Saddened by this description, this man, named Alfred Nobel decided to change the narrative of his life. With the large amount of money that he had accumulated, he established a foundation for the Nobel Prizes. And perhaps the best known of those prizes is the Nobel Prize for Peace.

Alfred Nobel got the chance to rewrite his obituary, to make his life and legacy more meaningful. He was blessed with much and he was a blessing to others.

So tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

Let us pray. Thank you, God for the gift of this day and for the gift of life. Help us to hear and follow the call of Jesus, to live for sake of your Kingdom, to make our lives meaningful, this day and every day.

