

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
22 Pentecost (Proper 27-C) on November 10, 2019
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Job 19:23-27a. Psalm 17:1-9. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17. Luke 20:27-38

Have you noticed that whatever media platforms you use, the dominating subject that permeates all media is advertising, telling us relentlessly about all the things we really need to do and buy to make us look and feel like successful people?

Yet how many of the things which are advertised are really important priorities for our lives?

Recently I've attended several funerals. I've also spent time with several people who are in the process of dying. Facing the reality of death gives us a very different perspective on life than we get from advertisers. In fact, most advertisements are distractions from what is most important in life.

This morning, our three Scripture lessons remind us that we will all die and meet our Creator face to face. And God will hold us accountable for the way we live on earth day by day. St John of the Cross summarizes the teaching of the Bible, and really the teaching of all religions in this way: "In the evening of life, we will be judged by love." In the end, what matters to God, what matters to the people around us, is the quality of our love, day by day.

In today's first reading, Job is in the midst of overwhelming physical suffering and pain, grieving the death of all his children, experiencing the loss of all his wealth and property. Job eagerly looks forward to his death. His words are echoed in the music of the Messiah and in the Burial Office: "I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth; and though this body be destroyed, yet shall I see God; whom I shall see for myself and mine eyes shall behold, and not as a stranger."

Job is not afraid of meeting God after his resurrection from the dead. He has walked with God throughout all the ups and downs of his lifetime. In his death, Job is looking forward to meeting God, who is his friend.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is challenged by a trick question from the Sadducees, who were the only sect of Jews who did not believe in a life after death or in any accountability to God after we die. In response to their hypothetical question about marriage and life after death, Jesus was clear that the resurrection of the dead is part of reality and that we are all accountable to God for the way we live.

And in the 2nd reading, Paul writes to the Thessalonian Christians about “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him” after our death. Then Paul talks about how Roman society (like most empires down through history) prioritize values that are contrary to God’s Kingdom way of Love. Paul says, political leaders will exalt themselves “above every so-called god or object of worship”. They will declare that they themselves are God. Roman Caesars, courts, legislators, military and wealthy business owners think they are the center of the universe. They do not recognize the reality of their accountability to God for loving all their neighbors.

All of today’s Scripture readings remind us that death and resurrection into the presence of our Creator is the most important reality every human being will face, whether they believe it or not. Since we are all accountable to God, the way we live and speak, think and act each day makes a crucial difference in the quality of life on this planet now... and in our long-term future. God created us to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves, including our enemies. None of us will do it perfectly, but this is why we were created, this is the goal for which God wakes us up every morning. And God lives within us, eager to help us live in this direction.

So what is really important is to learn to approach every day so we are prepared to come before God after our death and resurrection. How can we be prepared to joyfully meet our Creator?

You may not recognize this, but we are preparing at this very moment. By being here right now, being active participants in this congregation is one way that we prepare to joyfully meet God in our death and resurrection. In our daily prayers at home and our worship every Sunday, we are reminded that we come from God, we live with God and in the end, we return to God. Prayer and worship ground and center our life in the Love of God and neighbor.

Our reflection on the Jewish and Christian Scriptures at home, in worship and in Bible study groups helps us learn the ancient wisdom God gave to our ancestors. Through reflection on their wisdom and experience, God helps us see a larger perspective and purpose for our lives and for all human beings on this planet.

And since we can’t live the Jesus way of love without the help of God, we receive fresh transfusions of the loving Spirit or energy of Jesus into our bodies whenever we receive Christ’s Body and Blood at the altar.

As a congregation, we seek to embody God’s command to love our neighbors in need, both locally and around the world through our love for each other and our practice of mission outreach. We work sacrificially with God and each other, in very practical ways, to make the world a more loving and just community for all our neighbors.

This parish also reminds us every year at this time that our Scriptures teach us that we prepare for our death and resurrection by seeking to be good stewards of all that God has given to us. The Bible tells us that everything we are and have is a gift from God. God expects us to be good stewards or managers of the many gifts God has given us. God expects us to develop our gifts, develop the quality of love that God has woven into our DNA. We all have a shadow side, a reptilian brain capable of evil thoughts, words and actions. We have to steward both our God-given loving nature and our self-consumed, violent nature so that, with God's help, we keep growing in the direction of love, which is the purpose for which God placed us on earth.

As stewards of God's gifts, we are to care for God's creation, God's good earth. And God expects us to be good stewards of our abilities, of our relationships with God and with our neighbors and of the time God gives us each day. One day at a time we practice being good stewards so that when we die, we will have been good stewards of our entire lifetime.

How can you and I practice being good stewards each day? One way is to begin each morning asking...God, how do you want me to invest your gift of life and time today? Throughout the day we keep asking, Lord, how do you want me to use my time now?

Then, at the end of each day, we invite God who loves us and is always with us, to help us reflect back over the day. What are we most thankful for? When did we recognize God at work during the day? And what are we least thankful for? For what do we need healing and guidance? When did our thoughts, words and actions not reflect God's will and purpose for us? Then we ask for God's forgiveness and for help to be a better steward of the next day.

Another gift God has given us is money. We thank God for giving us the abilities, the health and motivation, the opportunities to work and earn money. We recognize that the income we have is not "my money" but God's money entrusted to our use. How does God want us to steward or manage God's gift of money?

In both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, tithing, giving 10% of our income away, is the norm we work toward, a measurable way of expressing love for God and our neighbors in need. For some people, thinking about a tithe can be daunting. Rebecca and I were blessed to have parents who practiced tithing and taught us to tithe as children. We've continued the spiritual practice of giving away 10% or more of our income through throughout our married life. It has not always been easy, especially when our income was so low that we could have qualified for food stamps. We give, not out of obligation, but out of deep gratitude to God for our many blessings. We constantly find joy in giving generously to God and our neighbors in need. While God has not provided everything we wanted, we have always had enough for our real needs.

I wonder, what stories do you have to tell about your attitudes toward money and your experiences of giving money for people in real need? Each year we are all invited to prayerfully ask, what does the way I spend my income reveal about my priorities and my love for God and my neighbors? What changes is God inviting me to make this year?

There are no simple answers to exactly how you and I are to live as good stewards of God's gifts of creation, of time, of relationships, of abilities and of money. It takes daily spiritual practices of gratitude, prayer and reflection, plus life-long learning in a community of faith to keep growing and maturing as faithful, joyful stewards of all the good gifts God has given to us.

So this week, in preparation for your own death and resurrection, how is God inviting you to take another step in being a good and grateful steward of the many gifts God has given you?

Let us pray: In the silence, I invite you to talk with God about one or two practical actions you can take this week to express your gratitude and your loving stewardship of the many gifts God has given you....

Day by day, dear Lord,
Three things we pray;
To see you more clearly,
Love you more dearly,
Follow you more nearly,
Day by Day.
Amen