

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Thanksgiving Sunday, November 21, 2010
Lessons: Isaiah 65:17-25 and Luke 12:15-21

THE FUTURE OF THANKFULNESS

Sunrise, sunset,
Sunrise, sunset,
Swiftly fly the years,
One season following another,
Laden with happiness and tears¹

Human life is better understood with compassion than with scorn. It does not serve us well to scorn either the happiness or the tears. The Bible expresses no satisfaction for God with the passing of human life, strength, health, or joy but does insist we recognize the realities of life and death to guard against foolish pride that denies our mortality or selfish greed that hoards the goods of life, neither sharing nor truly enjoying them.

We are living through a time of scorn, each faction shouting angrily to shame the rest, declaring the others completely wrong as if so to prove itself completely right. In such a time, we make enemies of neighbors, divide friendships, and perhaps embitter the love in families. Let even judgment – that is, evaluation of our own humanity and that of others – be made with compassion, not with scorn.

My subject is the future of thankfulness. Beneath that title lie the happiness and tears of human life in this world of ever-passing times and seasons. Here's the question. *How thankful can we be, should we let ourselves be, for any present joy when we know its time will pass?* Bringing that question together with our hope in Christ, I ask further: *What difference do Jesus Christ and his gospel make in the way we receive and live the days of our lives? How does he empower us to deal with joys and sorrows, gains and losses, comfort and disruption, beginnings and endings?*

At times, the Bible can be almost brutally realistic but only to become unquenchably hopeful. Much of optimism persists by refusing to look at the negative realities of life. *I know it's there, but I don't want to talk about it.* Again, we need compassion not scorn. It is understandable to wish to close our eyes to the dangers and sorrows of life. If we dwell upon the negatives, they take over our minds and consume our joys, snatching from us what do have and could enjoy now. Persistent negativity causes us to die our way through life.

That's no way to live. The Bible insists that we acknowledge the negatives – life's losses and griefs – and cuts through our pretenses and self-delusions, not to be cruel and crush our spirits, but to declare our great hope that surpasses all fear, grief, and shame. What I most want us to see and understand this morning is that this great hope which comes from God does not scorn our present joys and pleasures but sets us right with them so we can be truly thankful even though all times and seasons pass. The gospel, the good news, does not take away from us the goodness of this life but validates it as God's gift for us to enjoy but not to hoard anxiously. The truth that we cannot keep hold of life or love by clutching them fearfully to ourselves is declared by the Bible, not to make us value life and love less, but to free us from anxiety so we can give ourselves wholeheartedly to love and to life. God gives us life to expend in living, not to squirrel away.

We have quite a few common sayings about the ever-passing nature of time and so of our lives. Some are ancient. *Carpe diem*, "seize the day," implies that we must act now or opportunity will pass. *Sic transit gloria mundi*, "thus passes the world's glory," may be said with sympathy or wry pleasure in the downfall of someone we have considered pompous, but let us be quicker to sympathy. More commonly, we say, "Get while the getting's good," and even twist the saying from Jesus' parable into a toast we raise in the face of fate, "Eat, drink, and be merry . . . for tomorrow you may die." More sadly, I have heard many say over the past thirty-eight years of my ministry, "We never know what's coming." And very often they have added, "and it's a good thing we don't."

So far, it might seem we have two choices. We may delight in life, enjoying it as much as we can while it lasts, or we may hold back from life and love, fearing the pain we will suffer if we put too much of ourselves into living and loving. Most of us, however, most of the time do not make either of those choices fully. Instead, we balance preparing to live someday in the future with just doing what must be done and getting through each day.

The well-to-do farmer in Jesus' parable thinks he has arrived at that delightful place where he has secured his life and may begin to enjoy it, but he is wrong because his abundance cannot secure his life. That's the message: not that life should never be enjoyed, but that we cannot make for ourselves a life that is secure. In this world, everything is temporary. The question is not, *How can we amass enough to secure our lives?* but, *How are we to live the days and years that are given to us?*

In a recent adult forum, we talked about looking at both our satisfaction with things in the present and our disappointment with outcomes in our lives. The gospel, we know, can enable us to look beyond both, but how does it empower us to enjoy satisfactions and suffer disappointments honestly and faithfully — to live in and with the present? After all, the present is the only time in which we are actually alive.

I have found help in a long-outdated expression preserved in our language almost exclusively because it was used in the old King James Version of the Bible. The term I find helpful is the two-word phrase, “in earnest.”² Today, if we use the word “earnest” at all, other than as a man’s name, we are speaking of intensity and serious-minded application of effort. “She worked in earnest,” means she worked hard and purposefully; she really put herself into the task. There is, however, an older meaning that comes from the financial world of lending and borrowing in which something given “in earnest” was a down payment representing the pledge of more to come in full payment. So, the down payment on a mortgage loan is made “in earnest.” An earnest is a pledge or, in more traditional Christian terms, a *foretaste* of what is to come. Think of the child using his finger to skim leftover icing from the mixing bowl. That’s a foretaste of the cake to come. It’s an appetizer enjoyed doubly — for itself in the moment but also as a promise. What in our present life comes from faith, hope, and love can be received from God the same way — in earnest, as a foretaste good in its time but also made to be redeemed from disappoint and even death and fulfilled in full measure.

With God, the promise is that the fulness to come will even better — far better — than the foretaste suggests because what is tarnished now will be made pure, what is twisted will be straightened, what is cracked or broken will be healed and made whole. For me, coffee serves as an analogy. I enjoy it, but coffee never tastes as good as its aroma promises. Nothing in this life is as good as could be and should be for us, but the promise is that what we have received from God shall be even better than we now know enough to hope for. Even better than the foretaste suggests.

Trusting God, we are able to receive, experience, live, and share what is good in life because we believe it is given to us “in earnest” of what is to come beyond all loss and grief and far beyond our ability to appreciate or even imagine from our present viewpoint in this world of limitations and half-measures. We need not try to minimize grief by minimizing love but can give ourselves wholeheartedly to life and love, knowing their present time will pass and their passing will hurt but trusting God gives them to us in earnest of the fulness to come. We can live, not without pain, not without the tears, but without ultimate fear or despair, because we know the One in whom we have put our trust, and are persuaded he is able to keep all that we commit to him in earnest of that day when God will give back life and love in full measure. So, today let us be thankful without reservation or anxiety, without the fears that make us hoard rather than enjoying and sharing. For life not shared is meager, and what is good in life becomes better when we receive as a gift from the God who loves us and won’t quit, ever. Amen.

Notes for the online manuscript:

1. From *Fiddler on the Roof*.
2. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, “earnest.”