

Psalm 90:1-6, 12-17
Matthew 22:34-46

MAKING OUR DAYS COUNT

A number of years ago, I attended a one day seminar and the featured speaker was Dr. Barry Bailey, a well-known Methodist minister in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area. I particularly remember something he said that day. He told the audience that, when he was a young minister, he had been feeling poorly so he went to see his doctor. The doctor ran a number of tests on him and tried various medications but his condition worsened. Eventually, the doctor called him into his office, sat him down, and told him that he only had a few months left to live. Over time, it turned out, the doctor had made a misdiagnosis; and, once the illness was properly identified and the right medications were given, he healed quickly. After sharing that information, Dr. Bailey said to those of us gathered there that he felt all of us should preach as though we only had six months to live. His point was that, when he was told that he had a limited amount of time left in which to live, he found out what really mattered most, what was crucial to share with his congregation. He suggested that we do the same, no matter how much time we had left.

That thought is expressed in Psalm 90, which is one of the readings for this Sunday. The psalmist speaks of the eternal nature of God in contrast with the transient nature of human beings – “From everlasting to everlasting you are God.” On the other hand, “All our days pass away... our years come to an end like a sigh... they are soon gone, and we fly away.” Given that grim reality, we might expect the psalmist to be filled with despair or to say life is utterly hopeless. Instead, the psalmist asks the Lord to “teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.” In other words, since life does not go on and on but is, in fact, terminal, the psalmist petitions God to help us learn to value the time we do have and to live each day fully and thankfully. Because life is fragile and transitory in nature, the psalmist desires to make each day count for

time is a precious commodity. In light of the fact that our days here on earth are numbered, the psalmist wants to savor life by discerning the purposes of God, by delighting in the gifts God has given, and by living with gratitude in the time remaining. These thoughts move the psalmist to pray further, “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.”

In seminary, we were taught to listen to the scriptures as they carried on a conversation with each other. Psalm 90 speaks directly to the gospel lesson for this morning. There, in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus spells out for us what really matters the most and how we can best make our days count. In light of all that God has given to us and done for us, this is Jesus’ answer as to how we live each day fully and with thankfulness.

The narrative begins with a Pharisee, a lawyer who was an expert in the laws of God, asked Jesus a question in order to test him, to trip Jesus up, to embarrass him in front of others. Since there were 613 laws handed down by God, this religious scholar wanted to put Jesus on the spot by forcing him to choose one law above all the rest.

Jesus didn’t hesitate in responding to the lawyer’s question. Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Jesus cited two texts that all Jews knew by heart – to love God above everything else and to love your neighbor as yourself. There was nothing original or controversial in his response. By linking these two laws together, Jesus gave a concise summary of what really matters: to love God and to love others (in that order). Jesus not only joined these two commandments together, he modeled them for us by the way he lived (and died). His entire life was devoted to loving

God by obeying God and giving his all to God, and he accepted and loved all others. He fulfilled the law and the prophets by loving and serving God and neighbor. Jesus didn't stand in the temple and have a theological argument. He lived by loving and giving his all; and, he died by stretching out his arms on the cross and embracing God's will and the entire world so that all might live in harmony and know the peace of God.

Jesus is the way that leads to faithfulness. If we really want to make our days count for something, then we begin with loving the Lord our God. All of life and all of our days are lived in grateful and loving response to God, who first and foremost loves us. One of the earliest meanings of the word *religion* is *to bind together*. Thus, God takes the initiative and reaches out to us and draws us into a loving relationship with God's own self. There's nothing at all that we have done to deserve such grace. All we can do is to love God in return with everything that we are and have. If we are to love God, then the appropriate love for God is to be completely encompassing for such love cannot be offered in limited portions. We can't reserve our love of God for Sundays only; rather, our entire being is to be involved in the process of loving God every day, every hour of our lives.

Furthermore, Jesus didn't stop there. He noted that the love of God demands more than lip service; it requires compassionate service toward others. It is impossible to participate in the love of God without loving our neighbors. In his summary of the Torah, Jesus brought together religion and ethics – the love of God cannot be separated from the love of and concern for one's neighbor. Jesus tied together our profession of faith in God and an active engagement with a person in need. Our love for God requires that we seek justice and mercy on behalf of others. Our love for the neighbor in need is not an emotion but a real commitment to the well-being of the other. Thus, love, in its purest form, is selfless and it's sacrificial.

In the gospel lesson, Jesus is pointing us beyond ourselves in order to make our days count the most and to help us be the best we can be. He commands us to love God first because we are inclined to place ourselves at the center of the universe, usurping the majesty and holiness of the Lord of all creation. And, he commands us to love our neighbors precisely because we are inherently selfish; our inclination is to love ourselves first, putting our personal needs before the needs of others. When we make God the number one priority in our lives and love God with all that we are and have, and when we love and serve the people that God brings into our lives, then we will discover the way that leads to a fulfilled life. We will find our deepest joy and our greatest purpose. And, in the process, we will love ourselves in the best way possible.

William G. Carter said that love is not a prize to be hoarded, but a gift to be given away. If we love God who first loved us, it always leads us to love those around us. Then, he asks, how about the youth group's mission trip, where otherwise bored teenagers use paintbrushes and hammers to improve other people's homes? A teenager told me that he had a religious experience during a week like that. It suddenly dawned on him that the world doesn't revolve around him or his friends. As he committed his time and strength to repairing the home of some strangers, he began to take an interest in them. He learned their names and ate at their table. When they asked him to say grace at dinner one evening, he suddenly had a deep and abiding sense that God cared about all of them. "If I stayed home to play (my computer games)," he said, "I never would have known it."

Or what about the testimony of the lady who visits the nursing home each week? She started doing it because the flowers for the worship service were left behind one Sunday. "I didn't want them to go to waste," she said, "so I thought I would take them somewhere that somebody might enjoy them." When she arrived with a bouquet, the first person she saw

thought the flowers were meant for her. She didn't have the heart to say otherwise, so the next Sunday she returned with another bouquet for somebody else. The following Sunday, she took flowers to another resident. Now she is gradually moving through the whole facility, one room at a time, making sure that no one is left out. "These people are precious," she said, "both to me and to the Lord. And there's nothing like a cheerful visit to bring the joy of Christ to another child of God." Take note: she never knew most of these people before she took those flowers that day. If she had simply gone home after worship or stayed to herself, she might have missed out on what has become the most important two hours of her week.

The gospel lesson ends with Jesus asking the Pharisees a question in turn. "What do you think of the Messiah?" and they said he is "the son of David." Then, Jesus reminded the Pharisees that David himself referred to the Messiah as Lord; in so doing, Jesus corrected their faulty thinking about the Messiah – he was more than a descendant of David; he was more than the son of David, he was the very Son of God.

I point to those closing verses because I think, every day – if we are going to make our days count for something – we must give an answer to that very same question, "What do *you* (and I) think of the Messiah?" And, if we think Jesus is the Messiah, our Lord and our Savior, then the only correct answer is that we show he is the Messiah by the way we imitate him in selfless and sacrificial love for God and for our neighbors. It's not enough that we believe Jesus is Lord; we must also live it and act on it as well. We do that best by living lives that God loves, by doing that which is pleasing in God's sight. When we love God and we love our neighbor as ourselves, then we will experience the favor of the Lord our God upon us, and God will indeed prosper the work of our hands. We don't give and love in order to get; but, as we do so, our lives will be filled with joy and meaning, and we will be blessed.

There was a story about a man hiking in the mountains. He was taken by surprise by a sudden snowstorm and quickly lost his way. Since he wasn't dressed for the freezing temperature, he knew he needed to find shelter fast or he would freeze to death. Despite all of his efforts, time slipped by and his hands and feet became numb. He knew his time was short. Then he literally tripped over another man who was almost frozen to death. The hiker had a decision to make: continue in hopes of saving himself or try to help the stranger in the snow. In an instant he made his decision and threw off his wet gloves. He knelt beside the man and began massaging the man's arms and legs. The man began to respond and together they were able to find help. The hiker was later informed by a park ranger that, by stopping and helping the man who had fallen in the snow, he had most certainly helped himself. The numbness that had stricken the hiker vanished while he was massaging the stranger's arms and legs.

God's love for us motivates us to love God and our neighbors in return. This is true for both individuals as well as for congregations. It's very appropriate that we hear Jesus' command to love God and neighbor on this Sunday as we emphasize our church's ongoing mission for the sake of our Lord and those whom he has called us to serve. When we love and show compassion to others, we are blessed and we feel good about ourselves. Mostly, we gain a wise heart as we follow Jesus by loving God and neighbor with everything we have at our disposal, for it's precisely then that we discover the key to making our days count – to the glory of God and for the good of all. Amen.

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October 23, 2011