

The Second Measure of our Lives: How Lightly Have We Lived?

Rev. Dr. Don Ludwig, October 13, 2024

Introduction:

I look back to twenty-seven years ago, it was August 1997, Kathy and I were moving across country to this great new ministry position at Valley Community Presbyterian Church in Beaverton, Oregon, We had left good jobs, not knowing what the call of Christ would have for us, but knowing that we were not in the journey alone. Perhaps we were a little naive as we made our trek, thinking that the “promised land” of Oregon would add simplicity and serenity to our lives. Boy, were we wrong!

Wherever you go, there you are. Yes, our minds often compel us to look for greener pastures, we often look at our current world with much dismay, believing that if only this or that would change, our lives would be so much better.

Dr. Scott Peck, in his book **The Road Less Traveled**, begins the book by saying, “Life is Difficult.” He goes on to say that it is in the difficulties, the struggles, the tension between our hopes, dreams and reality, that we discover the meaning and purpose of life. It is in the journey where we find the promise of hope and renewal and life. Kathy and I were in such a hurry to move across the country. It was so frustrating having the brakes on the U-Haul go out, getting two flat tires and staying at some sketchy Motel 6’s. I still have nightmares when I remember our time in East St. Louis. // We gave ourselves 5-days to travel 3500 miles. I have often thought, would our trip have been less difficult if we took our time and took the route we really wanted to take?

Our Current Realities

A friend of mine from Clark College, knowing that I am a bi-professional, just recently said to me: “With so many difficulties and tensions in our world, it is an odd time to be a minister!” He is not wrong. It is an odd time to be a person of faith in the face of so many challenging and traumatic realities and the troubles seem to keep tumbling one on top of the other like the messengers in Job: mass shootings, natural disasters, wars, genocides, extreme heat, hurricanes, fire and flooding, siblings all over the country and across the globe struggle under the oppression of poverty and everyday violence. We live in a society where political divisions run deep, and threaten to tear at not only community structures but the fabric of democracy. Life is difficult.

On top of all that, we continue to be bombarded with health crises: from cancer, to contaminated water, to the on-going impact of Covid-19. We fear for the future. And friends, this doesn’t even acknowledge the daily burdens we and people of our communities carry, the burden of fighting to make ends meet (last week when Trustee

Craig Butler gave us a list of all the rising expenses, I heard and saw our collective nods). We get it. But for most of us, these rising expenses are not that critical to our personal financial well-being. That makes us rich! // For a moment, think about how these rising costs impact those less fortunate, those who are just getting started in adult life, those on fixed incomes? Life is difficult.

Other burdens that we carry these days: mourning the loss of loved ones, engaging in the daily work of parenting or caring for aging loved ones, facing the on-going realities of loneliness, mental illness, or challenging diagnosis. You know it – the list could go on and on. There is much to lament these days and a ton of anxiety about the future of our country and indeed the world. Raise your hand // if you have any anxiety about our upcoming Presidential election and the aftermath. We all do. Life is difficult.

People of faith, we are not the first to walk this way. Scriptures and stories from every religion are filled with communities and saints and sinners who have journeyed this way before us -- seeking God and some level of stability amidst the chaos and the loss and the trauma and political crisis.

What must we do to inherit eternal life?

A fitting question for today's reality is the story about the rich young ruler in the Gospel of Mark. What must we do to inherit eternal life? What must we do to create a world that rises above difficulties and allows everyone some semblance of authenticity and serenity? By the way, this story and the imagery of the camel and eye of a needle is found in the Gospel of Matthew, Luke as well as Mark is also found in the Quran (Surah Al-A'raf, verse 40). It is an important question to be sure. In the face of such chaos and despair and polarization and trauma, the rich ruler asks, what can I do?

There have been those who have tried to explain the camel and the eye of the needle, saying the eye of a needle was a small side gate in Jerusalem and in order to get the camel through the gate or this "eye of a needle", they would have to unload all of the owner's possessions and have the camel kneel down and slowly make its' way through the gate. Therefore, it is possible but very difficult, so they said. My friends, this notion is simply rubbish, it is a conspiracy theory for sure. First, there is no archeological evidence for there ever having been such a small gate in Jerusalem. Secondly, and perhaps just as important, I have been to Jerusalem and walked around the entire Old City and there is no such a gate!

Christians often want to rationalize scripture especially when it threatens their way of life or view of the world. When in fact, most scholars claim that this passage is full of hyperbole. It is impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Period! That

is the point here! That means, in these Christian and Islamic stories, it is impossible for the rich person to inherit eternal life – in fact, it is impossible for anyone to inherit eternal life – ON THEIR OWN. Do you see the hyperbole here? You can't work your way to eternal life. You can't buy your way to eternal life. Only by trusting in God or a Higher power or whatever that might mean for you, can you liberate yourself and others to a whole new world of freedom and vision for humanity.

Everyone Appears as Buddhas

“Everyone appears as buddhas in the eyes of Buddha.” Only by letting go of your worldly attachments and seeing the world through the lens of faith, the lens of Buddha, the lens of God, can we become the change we seek. In other words, only those who have “lightly lived” can see how their lives are a manifestation of God's love to others -- can see other people – even their enemies – as buddhas.

The alternative to seeing others as buddhas is to see others as pigs. I remember years ago during the political campaign between Obama and McCain when Obama said (referring to the vice presidential candidate at the time), “if you put lipstick on a pig, it is still a pig!” Do you remember that? I have to admit that when I watched the current vice presidential debate two weeks ago, Obama's words were all I could think of. I just had such a pit in my stomach thinking about lipstick on a pig. But here is the thing, how am I any better than my self-perceived enemies when I choose to see them as pigs? How might the partisan divide change if we choose to view those on the other side of the aisle as buddhas?

In his book, **The Things You Can See Only When You Slow Down: How to be Calm in a Busy World**, Haemin Sunim offers a vision for treading lightly through life. I highly recommend this read to you. He writes, “In the chambers of our heart, we have two tenants living side by side: Adolf Hitler and Mother Teresa. When we are overcome by insecurity and fear, we feel the inner workings of Hitler. When we are in touch with love and connection, we hear the gentle voice of Mother Teresa.”

When I consider my life's journey, I am forever grateful for Southminster. Over the last 18 and a half years, Kathy and I have traveled through many storms but we never felt alone. You supported us as we got our doctorates at the same damn time (what were we thinking?). You were there with the ups and downs of adoption and raising three children with special needs, you were there when Kathy had a brain tumor and I was beside myself. Friends, over the years you have been my Mother Teresa.

Life is difficult, yes, but not so much when you have others supporting you – not so much when you hear the gentle voice of Mother Teresa – of love and connection – in the

community all around you. Whatever storms come our way, “Southmin” people of faith, we have proven that we can rise up and face them with courage, confidence and compassion knowing that we have each other.

Steps to Live more Lightly

I would argue that our scripture today (and most if not all of Jesus teaching for that matter) is not about heaven as an otherworld reality. Eternal life begins now. Eternal life is here and the world we together create. "How lightly we have lived" refers to the idea of living life with a sense of lightness – with a focus on living in the moment and accepting things and others as they are. Living lightly provides a way to not be consumed by the difficulties all around us but instead rise above them by finding your center in spite of them and in the middle of it all. That is the eternal life that Jesus is talking about. “When your mind is joyful and compassionate, the world is, too.”

8 Steps to “Living Lightly”

In closing, let us take a moment and hear some ideas for living lightly. Perhaps you can choose one or two to be a part of your stewardship this week.

- Blessings: Consider your resources and what you are able to give toward helping others.
- Be aware: Notice when you are making judgments or expectations, and when things don't meet them.
- Pause: Take a breath and tell yourself to have no expectations.
- Reduce responsibilities: Consider how much weight you are carrying in your life, and what you can let go of.
- Consume less: Live in harmony with the earth by consuming less and reusing and recycling.
- Be less busy: Create a serene space for your favorite things.
- Clear emotional baggage: Let go of emotional baggage from your mind/heart.
- Live in the moment: Accept things as they are, w/o judgment or expectations

A-men.