

33rd Sunday, Ordinary Time

Delivered on Nov 15, 2015

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We just heard Jesus give a vivid description of how He will return at the end of the world to complete God's plan of salvation....Normally, I'd take this opportunity to preach about the end of the world, about Jesus coming back with great power and glory, and about how He wants us to be on guard and prepared because no one knows the day nor the hour...But, since this same Gospel theme will come up in two weeks, I thought I would preach on a related subject, one we rarely talk about or preach about, ...NOT about the end of the world,...but about **our own end**...I mean, what happens to us when our earthly life is over...I'm going to look at two questions. First question: *Will I really go on living after I die or is this life all there is?* ...How many of you have ever asked that question?...How many of you have ever had times when you weren't real sure about the answer?... I have...even after reading the Bible from cover to cover,...

It took me years of pondering over this question and reading scripture, to finally come to a peace of mind and heart about the answer....I was especially helped by what St. Paul wrote to some Christians at Corinth who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead...He basically told them that if we have placed our hopes in Christ **only** for this life we're living right now, then we should be pitied because, then, what's the big deal?...Why did He bother to come?...Why? Well let's walk through it step by step....

First,- from the beginning of human history - God gave the human race chance after chance, yet we continually refused to follow His will and accept His goodness...So, God sent His Son into the world to restore humanity's relationship with God that had been severely ruptured by sin...God's Son was born of a woman as we are, grew up as we grow,...learned from His parents as we do...left home as we do,...He did what His Father had sent Him to do:...preach repentance, mercy and unconditional love, heal the sick and raise the dead...He took a lot of flak from the religious leaders for hanging around with sinners of all sorts...He let Himself be sold for silver by one of His closest friends, to be condemned on false charges, lashed with whips and crowned with thorns, and nailed to a bloody cross...He died with words of love and mercy for His enemies and for all of us on His lips.

Why? Why would Jesus leave heaven to come and live as one of us... and do what He did and go thru what He went through?...Why?...Was it so that we might live for 60, 70, 80, maybe 90 years, and then disappear into dust? ...Was it so uncounted thousands could die of hunger each day,...babies be aborted or gunned down in school,... millions give their lives on the battlefield for freedom,... good men and women waste away from cancer,..and then PFFT! that would be the end of us forever?...If death is the absolute end, ...if we die and are nothing forever after, . then Christ was a fool...and His cross was a senseless, pointless tragedy....He might as well have stayed at home!...

My friends, not only does it make no sense,...it contradicts the very words of Jesus: "I came that you may have life and have it more abundantly."..."Whoever eats of this bread will live forever." ..."The Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life."...He defeated death not for Himself, but for you and me...This can all be summed up in that very familiar verse from John's Gospel: "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that

whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.”...That’s the core of Christian faith... If it hasn’t grabbed you yet, don’t give up; just keep praying, “Lord help my unbelief!”

Ok, that takes care of the 1st question...Now here’s the 2nd question: *If we go on living after death, what sort of life will it be?*...I’ll bet we all have thought about that one, right? I remember growing up with all sorts of images of heaven, purgatory and hell...from jumping from cloud to cloud with the angels...to a raging fire tended by horned devils with pitchforks...I can’t say I’ve advanced very far from those early imaginings...I think we all have to admit ignorance of what afterlife will really be like...St. Paul makes that very clear in 1 Cor.: “No **eye has seen, nor ear has heard**, nor the human heart conceived, what God **has** prepared for those who love Him.”

So, what can we say about heaven?...I see heaven as a state of being more ALIVE than we’ve ever lived before. ...Can you recall a time when you felt so gloriously alive that you almost couldn’t stand it, ...like seeing your baby for the very first time,...folding a grandchild in your arms,...winning the big game,...getting that big promotion, ...coming up with a brilliant idea ,...marrying the love of your life?...Whatever it was, multiply that to the nth degree and you still won’t come close to the joy that is life without end in heaven...I have no idea what I God will look like, or what our risen bodies will look like... I do know I will still be me,...hopefully with a smaller nose and better teeth...The problem is, we’re still left to our imaginations...What we can bet on, though, is this: God will be there, ...no longer a hidden God, but as God is...Father , Son and Holy Spirit...and all those who loved God with all their hearts will be there including our own mothers and fathers and loved one’s and dearest friends..A party like none we’ve ever seen - and the party never ends.

Ok, so what about hell?...We have this image of hell as an eternal raging fire reserved for those who reject God’s gift of salvation,...but hell is a fate far worse than fire...For me, Hell is anguish, agony, total frustration, total alienation...as my whole being cries out for a God who is out of reach....forever...It is living in this state of unending torment because though I was made for God,...I am literally godless....Though I was made for love, ...I am totally loveless...Though I was made for community,...I am totally alone...days without end.....But our consolation is this: no one will be without God forever unless he or she chooses to be... The famed writer, C.S. Lewis, expressed it as well as any one : “There are only two kinds of people: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’...and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘**Thy** will be done.’”..Think about it.

Then there’s purgatory....I’ll settle for it...It simply means that most of us – sinners that we are – even though our sins have been forgiven, will have to wait before we “see” God...Jesus said, “You are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”...We are not really ready to enter the presence of an infinitely holy and perfect God... Purgatory. is not a place, it is a process...a process of being purified, being cleansed of every trace of even the tiniest sin ...Purgatory is like washing up for dinner,...getting out all the dirt and grime before we can sit down to the heavenly banquet God has prepared for us. ...Purgatory is both painful and happy...Painful, because we have a deep aching and longing to be with God, of being so close to God, but not yet there. ...Happy, because we know that, aided by the prayers of those we leave behind, ...we WILL at long last rest in the presence of a LOVE greater than we have ever known.

Let me end with a story. A man dies and St. Peter meets him at the pearly gates. St. Peter says, “Ok, here’s how it works. You tell me all the good things you’ve ever done,...and I will give you a certain number of points for each one...When you reach 100 points, you get in.”...The man says, “Ok,... I stayed married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her.”

... "That's wonderful," says St. Peter, "that's worth 3 pts." ... "Is that all?" the man asks. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported it both financially and with my service." ... "Terrific!" says St. Peter, "that's certainly worth a point." ... The man says "Gee, only one point. ... How about this... I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a homeless shelter for veterans." "Fantastic, that's good for two more points." ... "TWO POINTS! ... At this rate the only way I get into heaven is by the grace of God!" ... "Bingo!", cries St. Peter, "You finally get it... Come on in!"

Amazing grace! ... Whether our afterlife begins with our death, or when Christ comes at the end of time, ... heaven is not something we could ever deserve on our own. ... If every good deed we do is a step up to heaven, we would still never get high enough. We'd have to stand on the top step and cry out to God, and He'd have to reach down and pull us up the rest of the way.

In the words of that great classic hymn: 'Tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home. ... May it be so for each of us. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. AMEN.