

More Than Meets the Eye
Luke 6:17 – 26; 1 Corinthians 15:12 – 20
Sunday, February 17, 2019

Last Sunday, I told you a story about a time when I went fishing with my grandfather at this farm pond in Kentucky and we caught all these fish that ended up getting away. I used to go to this small town in Kentucky every summer growing up, sometimes for weeks at a time with my grandparents. And those ponds where we always went fishing were on the farm that belonged to my aunt Lil. I spent so much time there over the years, fishing and playing baseball in the yard with my cousins, snapping green beans with Aunt Lil, riding four wheelers all over the fields and gravel roads, shooting fireworks at cows. It was my favorite place in the world; the place where, when you close your eyes and go to a happy place, *that's* where I go.

And I was *so close* to my Aunt Lil. She was my mom's mom's sister, and she was like another grandmother to me. Especially in these ten years since my grandmother died. She was that *connection* to my grandparents; the last of that generation. She was the sweetest, kindest, most loving and faithful Christian woman, and I loved her *so much*.

After I told you that story on Sunday, I woke up on Monday morning to the news that Aunt Lil had died. She was 90 years old and had lived a good, rich, blessed life. But the past few years her health had gotten worse, and over the past week she had really been struggling. And while I was glad that she didn't have to struggle anymore, I was really sad because I'm really going to *miss* her in my life, and I didn't get a chance to say goodbye. It had been a couple of months since I talked with her and a couple of years since I got to go down there and visit, and I had actually been thinking about going down there in April to see her. But it was too late.

Her funeral was on Thursday, and my mom and I tried to find a way to go down there, but it's like a 14-hour drive, and the nearest airport is two hours away in Nashville, and tickets were *way* too expensive on such short notice. So we realized that it just wasn't realistic for us to get there. And that was *hard*. I was *sad* because I wouldn't see her or talk to her again, and I was *disappointed* because I didn't get to say goodbye. I think a lot of us have probably experienced something similar to that before. A loss that leaves us feeling disappointed or incomplete, whether it's because we didn't get to spend enough time with them, or we didn't get to say goodbye, or there was something else going on there that leaves us without the sense of closure and peace that we need.

With all of that going on, I came into the office and looked at the lectionary text (the prescribed scripture reading) for today. And I saw that it was this reading from 1 Corinthians. Chapter 15 in 1 Corinthians is the most extensive discussion anywhere in scripture about resurrection. Paul talks for 58 verses and gets in to questions like, "How will the dead be raised?" and, "What kind of body will we have?" Apparently, some of the Christians in Corinth were struggling with the idea of a physical, bodily resurrection of the dead.

Paul came out of a Jewish background, and the way that many Jewish people understood resurrection was that at the end of days, God would raise *all* the dead – body and soul – to live a new life in the kingdom of God. So it wasn't just that our *souls* or *spirits* go to be with God one by one when we die, it was that we are *all* raised at the same time, body and spirit. Paul talks about how Jesus *began* this process of resurrection. He calls him the "first fruits" of those who have died. It's like if you see a tree and you don't know what kind of tree it *is*, but then an apple pops up on it, and you know it's an apple tree. You know what all the rest of the fruit is going to

look like. Well, in the same way, Paul says, Jesus is the first fruit that shows us what the resurrection of the dead will look like.

But the Corinthians came out of *Greco-Roman* culture (not Jewish culture), and in Greco-Roman culture there was a separation of the body and the spirit. The soul was seen as pure and heavenly, while the body, while beautiful, was seen as corrupt, sinful, physical matter that was keeping the soul or spirit from being free. And so in Greco-Roman culture it was thought that when we die, the spirit is released from the body, and we no longer *need* our corrupt, physical bodies. Because of this, people steeped in Greco-Roman culture, like the Corinthians, had a hard time with this Jewish understanding of the resurrection and with the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus. It didn't fit with their understanding of how the world worked (body = bad, spirit = good; well, in Jesus both body and spirit are raised). So, apparently, some of the Corinthians had been *denying* the resurrection, saying that there is no resurrection of the dead, and that *Christ* was not physically raised.

So Paul spends all this time talking with them about the resurrection, saying that our whole faith depends on the fact that Christ was raised from the dead. Without that, he says, we have nothing. And he says this one thing toward the end of today's reading that really struck me. Paul says, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." *If for this life only we have hoped....* And I realized that that's what I had been doing with my Aunt Lil. I was so sad and disappointed because I wouldn't get to see her anymore in this life. But what Paul is stressing here to the Corinthians and to us is that *this life is not all there is*. That there is a life beyond what we can see and know and understand; a life built on the promises of God; a life that has been inaugurated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Of course it's okay to be sad and to miss people when they die, because we love them and we feel very deeply the pain of their absence in our everyday lives. Even *Jesus* felt that when he wept for his friend Lazarus. But *faith* and *hope* are not about what we can *see*. They are about *trusting* where we *cannot see*. The challenge of faith is to be mindful, even in our most difficult, painful situations, that this life is not all there is. That our hope is set on something *more* than we can see and hear and feel.

This is what we see Jesus getting at in our reading from Luke. He says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on my account. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven." He is saying, "You may be suffering in this life, *but this life is not all there is.*"

Then he says, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep." He's talking about those who have joy and fullness in this life *at the expense of those who are suffering*. Like, "Woe to you who are rich and full and laughing because you have taken advantage of the poor and the helpless, or you have just ignored them while you get your fill." He's saying to them, "You may have it all in this life, *but this life is not all there is.*"

It's easy to look at the world around us and see the injustice and oppression and sickness and suffering and violence and death that takes place every day and to feel overwhelmed or even to *despair* because we don't see things getting any better. We see wrongs that do not get righted; innocent people suffering while the wicked prosper. And, typically, Christians respond in one of

two ways. Either we are so focused on *this* world and justice in *this* life that we lose any sight of the life to come, or we are so focused on the life to come (on getting to heaven) that we lose any impetus for justice in this world. Either *this* life is all that matters or *that* life is all that matters.

But *we* are not just physical *or* spiritual. We are body *and* spirit. We have been *redeemed* as such in Christ, and Paul says we will be *raised* as such. Our faith calls us to a *balance* between heaven and earth, between the physical and the spiritual, between this life and the life to come. Jesus embodied *both* of those things *perfectly*. And our calling as Christ's followers is to live here and now in such a way that it shows people something about the life that is to come. We give them a glimpse of the kingdom of God on earth. We work for justice in this world and this life because of what we believe about the world and the life that is to come.

Author N.T. Wright says, "Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of God's creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, or comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings and for that matter one's fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world – all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make."¹ The things we do in this life do not end with us. They are not lost. They live on in the people we leave behind and in the new world that God is creating.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, pg. 208.

When we talk about eternal life, we're not just talking about living forever in heaven after we die. We're talking about a life that existed before we were born, includes this life, and goes on once this life has ended. It is life that has no beginning or end, it just goes on and on and on, forever with God. Because you were known to God before you were created, and you will reside forever with God when you die. We are called to live this life as people who know that this life is not all there is.

So if you're grieving a loss or despairing at the suffering and injustice around us, remember, this life is not all there is. If you're mourning a relationship that needs healing and forgiveness, but it just doesn't seem like that is possible, remember, this life is not all there is. But if you're living only for the satisfaction of the present moment, in ways that hurt others or ignore their pain, remember, this life is not all there is. If you just can't find what you need in this life, remember, this life is not all there is. And if you *have* everything you need in this life, live like this life is not all there is.

There is more to life than meets the eye. And our challenge, in good times and bad, is to live in ways that trust that and bear witness to the world of the life that is possible in Christ.