

May 24, 2020

*“The Ending”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 5:1-14

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Whew! That seems like a rather harsh thing for Jesus to say. “Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you.” Here he had just cured the man and made him well after thirty-eight years of pain and suffering as an invalid. What a wonderful, compassionate thing to do. But then Jesus implies that if the man somehow sinned in the future, something even worse would happen to him that would make his thirty-eight years of being disabled seem like a picnic in the park or day at the beach - if we were allowed to go! Like I said, “Whew!”

But, as is often the case with Jesus, there’s more here than meets the eye. There’s a much greater point to which Jesus is speaking. Now, I’ll get to that, but first I want to remind you of a famous football game. It was Super Bowl LI, and it was watched by 172 million people. The Patriots were playing the Atlanta Falcons and were behind 28-3 in the third quarter. Do you remember that game, and how disheartened and frustrated and depressed we New England fans were sitting there watching. Some of us felt sick to our stomachs. And many of us just turned off the television and went to bed. But then, the comeback started. It was really unbelievable. Incredible passing plays by Brady, incredible catches by Amendola and Hogan and White, great sacks by the defense, and then the catch of the century by Edelman where he just managed to get his fingers under the ball for a critical completion. Every play mattered since time was running out. The Patriots tied the game in regulation, and then went on to win it in overtime, 34 to 28. Whew! We were all emotionally drained after that game, and talked about it for weeks. We felt euphoric, exhilarated! But now, but now, it’s just a distant memory. Despite it being perhaps the greatest football game ever played, nobody really talks about it anymore. Even though my husband recorded the game, he never watches it. And why is that? Well, it’s because we know the ending. We don’t have to go back and replay it – we know how it ends.

And that’s what Jesus was referring to when he spoke to the man who was lame. Jesus knows the ending. He knows the joy and glory and magnificence that await us at the end of our earthly life. That’s what he was telling the man. You see, the man had been made physically sound, and now Jesus needed to make sure he stayed spiritually sound. Because Jesus knows how easy it can be to fall back into our sinful ways and fall short by neglecting our Christian responsibilities and way of life. So he speaks to the man about his sins. Now what could have been the man’s sins? I don’t know – maybe he was

wallowing in self-pity and complaining. Maybe he was angry at his situation, and taking it out on others with his harsh and hurtful words. Whatever his sins were, Jesus sent him off with the warning to change his ways, and sin no more.

And perhaps this is an important lesson for us today during this pandemic, for we too need to stay spiritually sound. Because it is easy to fall back into sinful ways. I mean, look now – we're tempted to complain about this situation, we're angry and frustrated, we withdraw, we worry about the future, we don't trust in God to get us through this situation. And most of all, we're fearful. Why? Well, because this coronavirus pandemic is a vivid reminder of our own mortality. Yes, this pandemic is a vivid reminder of our own mortality. We are having to do things like wear face masks, social distance, restrict our activities because people are afraid of getting sick and dying. Which I understand, and I'm not minimizing that. However, as Christians, remember – we know the ending. We know there is joy and glory and magnificence that awaits us at the end. Obviously we need to be wise and take care of ourselves, but at the same time, let us not be afraid.

Now of course to get to the ending, we must first get through this life. And as followers of Christ, we are called to enjoy this life God has given us and to bear good fruit - fruits of joy, compassion, generosity, peace, patience, love. Because the truth is, how we live our life here on earth, does matter. Jesus made a point of this many times. He said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do the will of my Father will enter." He told the parable of a field. There were good seeds bearing wheat and there were other seeds bearing weeds. And the landowner, God said, "Let them both grow and then, at the harvest, the wheat will be kept, but the weeds will be thrown out." Jesus told another parable about sheep and goats – those who helped the poor and needy, and those who didn't. And those who had compassion went to heaven and those who didn't show compassion, didn't go to heaven. These parables encourage us keep our spiritual house in order.

Because what awaits us at the end, is so worth it! It is something so wonderful, so incredible, we can't even begin to envision. St. Paul was actually given a glimpse of heaven, and he tells us, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him." The Bible assures us that the glories of heaven far outweigh the struggles of earth, like this pandemic. Paul says, "Our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that

vastly outweighs them and will last forever!” The disciple John promises that in heaven, all will be well, “there will be no mourning, no crying, no pain.” And the best thing about our ending, is that it is really only the beginning. I love the story of how Winston Churchill arranged his funeral because it so aptly symbolizes our Christian faith. After Mr. Churchill’s funeral service had ended and the benediction was pronounced, a bugler high on one side of the dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral began to play, “Taps,” the universal signal that the day is over. But when that had finished, there was a long pause and then a bugler on the other side played “Reveille,” the signal of the beginning of a new day.

Yes, the fact is – all of us will die of something, some day. And so, let’s remain spiritually sound. And let’s be unafraid. I like the way Rev. William Sloane Coffin puts it, “The one true freedom in life is to come to terms with death, for death is an event that embraces all of us. And the only way to have a good death is to lead a good life, one full of curiosity, generosity and compassion.”

And I know so many of you are leading a good life. I’m constantly awed by how so many of you are reaching out in new and creative ways to share love and compassion with one another. I hear of new, wonderful stories each week. And to see people working at the plant sale, and interacting with the public and staying upbeat and happy. I’m so proud to be the pastor of this congregation. That’s why I don’t want you to be afraid. Like I said, certainly take care of yourself and live and enjoy this life that God has given you. But remember the ending. And know that you do not have to be afraid.

I leave you with these words of Rev. E.H. Hamilton as he challenges our fear:

*You’re Afraid? Of what?*

*To feel the spirit’s glad release?*

*To pass from pain to perfect peace,*

*The strife and strain of this life to cease?*

*Afraid – of that?*

*Afraid? Of what?*

*Afraid to see the Savior’s face,*

*to hear his welcome and to trace the glory that gleams from his wounds of grace?*

*Afraid – of that?*

I’m not! Are you? Amen