

“Dedication to Something That Lasts”

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Hebrews 10:19-25 and Mark 13:1-13

Our first text comes from the book of Hebrews. As I have said before, Hebrews is not so much a letter as it is an early Christian sermon, words of exhortation delivered by a preacher to a congregation that was under the threat of persecution. Not only were they facing hardship for their faith, some of them were wondering what difference it made to be committed to following Jesus. Now a few things to keep in mind as you hear these words. When the preacher speaks of entering the sanctuary, know that he is not talking about some physical building, but the reality of God’s presence, which can be experienced in any number of places. When he speaks of having a great priest over the house of God, remember that he is speaking of Jesus, whom he elsewhere describes as one who understands our human weakness. When you hear this text, think about the way to God that Jesus opened and modeled and also about what Hebrews says about the importance of meeting together on a regular basis. *Read Hebrews here.*

Our second text comes from the 13th chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Most scholars believe that Mark was the first of the gospels to be written, and that it was written either just before (or, more likely, not long after) the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. At some point in the year 70, the Romans, who had the city of Jerusalem under siege, broke the city’s defenses and sacked it. Thousands upon thousands of people were killed in the bloody melee that ensued. The magnificent Temple, which had become the symbolic heart of the city and its religious practice, caught on fire and was destroyed. When you hear the words of Mark’s gospel, realize that they were written in this context, the context of a world filled with violence and threat.

This section of Mark is referred to as apocalyptic - in other words, it purports to reveal how God will act to deliver people who are in the midst of great hardship. Pay attention now to Mark’s account of what Jesus says to his disciples as they look down on the great temple from the vantage point of the Mount of Olives, just a few days before his crucifixion. And when Jesus speaks of wars, and rumors of wars, famines, and earthquakes, know that people have seen in them for two thousand years a sign that the end of the world is near. What is more important than prediction of the future is what Jesus says the disciples should do when the world feels to them like it is falling apart. *Read Mark here.*

The Temple that stood in Jerusalem during Jesus’ life was quite an impressive structure. Herod had begun work on it in 19 B.C. The Temple itself was finished in two years, but the complex around it took much longer to build. Constructed with and upon gigantic stones, some of them weighing as much as 80 tons, it covered an area five football fields long and three football fields wide. It dwarfed our little complex here at Immanuel.¹

The Temple’s exterior, covered as it was in white marble and gold, truly would have made a dazzling, utterly breath-taking sight to pilgrims approaching it in the morning light, with early sun

striking the front façade. It was an impressive architectural feat, a living testimony to human effort and ingenuity, and it must have seemed a fitting place indeed to celebrate God's presence on earth.

So when Jesus came out of the Temple, where he had been teaching, it's no surprise that one of the disciples marveled at it, saying, "Take a look at this, Rabbi! What large stones and what large buildings." But just at the moment when the disciple is awestruck by something he thinks will last forever, Jesus tells him something almost unimaginable, "*Do you see this? All of this will come down. Not one stone will be left upon another.*" And then, a little later, sitting on the Mount of Olives, looking westward on the temple, a few of them - the inner circle, Peter, Andrew, James and John ask Jesus privately about when this will take place. And that's when Jesus launches into talking about how things fall apart.

Ever since the words of Mark 13 were first written down and read aloud, followers of Jesus in some place or other have seen in his words about wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes, the signs that the world would end soon. But the world never seems to come to an end. And just when these followers of Jesus think it's safe to stop holding their breath, and to come back off the edge of their seats, someone else comes along to warn them that the end is near. It's been happening for two thousand years. That's why I'm not so sure this passage is as much about the end of the world as it is about what really lasts when all is said and done - and how we should behave when we feel like our world really is coming to an end. Which makes it an appropriate passage for us to consider on this Stewardship Dedication Sunday: because today is a day to think about what is really important in life, what really matters, what really endures, what will really last.

The first lesson of the scripture is that what really lasts, what really endures, is not the buildings we build and pay to maintain. They are important, but they are important not in and of themselves. They are important because they perform a function. They are important because of the memories that are made in them and the mission that they facilitate.

In a previous congregation, I talked about how it was important to regard our church building as facility and not a fortress. Our building was meant to facilitate our mission to the larger community and world, it was intended to be a place where we could be nurtured for the work of being God's people. So the meaning of our buildings here is what we do when we are in them, and what we are inspired to do when we are outside of them. The meaning of our buildings here is not just what happens in them one day a week, or perhaps if we are fortunate, more than once a week. The meaning of our buildings comes in what happens seven days a week because we have met here. I hope we maintain these buildings, we need to maintain them, but they will not last forever. What *will* last is the work we do because we have been inspired, taught, and encouraged here.

Buildings don't last forever, and neither do bodies. Yesterday I did premarital counseling for a young couple in our congregation, and last night I went to a wedding for a couple in Judith's congregation. In such situations I am reminded more and more of how time marches on. I am still, I hope, at least eight or ten years away from watching my own daughters tie the knot, but now when I see a bride come down the aisle or a hillside, escorted by her dad, I feel a catch in my throat that I didn't feel four or five years ago.

The last wedding I officiated, I realized that I was old enough to be the bride and groom's father. I would have been a young father, but nonetheless. Now when I watch a father dance with his newly married daughter, or see grandparents on the dance floor, dancing to the strains of some song that Frank Sinatra made famous, I'm more likely to feel my eyes well up with tears. Part of the reason tears come is because what I'm witnessing is what is really important. And part of the reason tears come is because of the recognition that our lives here on Earth don't last forever.

Children grow up, and then they may become parents, and grandparents, and perhaps even great grandparents. They too grow older. The well-laid plans they make may or may not come to fruition. They may or may not attain a ripe old age. And their bodies will eventually give out. Because that is the way God made us.

Every time I officiate at a funeral or memorial service, I am reminded that what really lasts in our lives is not our bodies. Whatever happens with our souls after we die, what lasts in this life after we leave this sphere is the impact we have made on other people. The difference we've made.

If you are of a certain age, you have probably had the experience of being in a funeral home or in a receiving line at a church, and having somebody you don't know come through and say, "You know something? Your Dad made all the difference in the world to me." Or having someone you've never met say to you, "I'll never forget your Mom. She was there for me. When she did this, or that, it helped me more than you'll ever know. She really made a difference."

What lasts is not finally our buildings or our bodies, but what we do while we inhabit them in the name of and for the sake of love. Paul McCartney said it this way. "In the end, the love we make is equal to the love we take."² When we think about our stewardship, we do well to think about in terms of the love we are able to accomplish with it.

Tony Snow, who was a broadcast journalist and later became press secretary for George W. Bush, wrote an essay for *Christianity Today* not too long before he died of colon cancer. In the essay, he talked about what happened to him when he realized that his life was growing shorter.

Bear with me as I read a piece of what he wrote in that essay.

"There's another kind of response, although usually short-lived - an inexplicable shudder of excitement, as if a clarifying moment of calamity has swept away everything trivial and tinny, and placed before us the challenge of important questions.

The moment you enter the Valley of the Shadow of Death, things change. You discover that Christianity is not something doughy, passive, pious, and soft. Faith may be the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. But it also draws you into a world shorn of fearful caution. The life of belief teems with thrills, boldness, danger, shocks, reversals, triumphs, and epiphanies. Think of

Paul, traipsing though the known world and contemplating trips to what must have seemed the antipodes (Spain), shaking the dust from his sandals, worrying not about the morrow, but only about the moment.

There's nothing wilder than a life of humble virtue - for it is through selflessness and service that God wrings from our bodies and spirits the most we ever could give, the most we ever could offer, and the most we ever could do.

Finally, we can let love change everything. When Jesus was faced with the prospect of crucifixion, he grieved not for himself, but for us. He cried for Jerusalem before entering the holy city. From the Cross, he took on the cumulative burden of human sin and weakness, and begged for forgiveness on our behalf.

We get repeated chances to learn that life is not about us - that we acquire purpose and satisfaction by sharing in God's love for others. Sickness gets us partway there. It reminds us of our limitations and dependence. But it also gives us a chance to serve the healthy. A minister friend of mine observes that people suffering grave afflictions often acquire the faith of two people, while loved ones accept the burden of two people's worries and fears.³

Then Snow wrote this.

"Most of us have watched friends as they drifted toward God's arms not with resignation, but with peace and hope. In so doing, they have taught us not how to die, but how to live. They have emulated Christ by transmitting the power and authority of love.

I sat by my best friend's bedside a few years ago as a wasting cancer took him away. He kept at his table a worn Bible and a 1928 edition of the Book of Common Prayer. A shattering grief disabled his family, many of his old friends, and at least one priest. Here was a humble and very good guy, someone who apologized when he winced with pain because he thought it made his guest uncomfortable. He retained his equanimity and good humor literally until his last conscious moment. "I'm going to try to beat [this cancer]," he told me several months before he died. "But if I don't, I'll see you on the other side."

His gift was to remind everyone around him that even though God doesn't promise us tomorrow, God does promise us eternity - filled with life and love we cannot comprehend - and that one can in the throes of sickness point the rest of us toward timeless truths that will help us weather future storms.

Through such trials, Snow writes, God bids us to choose: Do we believe, or do we not? Will we be bold enough to love, daring enough to serve, humble

*enough to submit, and strong enough to acknowledge our limitations? Can we surrender our concern in things that don't matter so that we might devote our remaining days to things that do?"*⁴

Every Stewardship Dedication Sunday, we are presented again with a choice and a challenge:

- † *To give of our lives and our money to things that really finally matter.*
- † *To give of our lives and our money to things that really last.*
- † *To give of our lives and our money to God.*

Some of you remember Rosemary Atkinson. Some of you never met her. Rosemary, who never had any children, died this past spring. A couple of weeks ago we received a bequest from her estate, dedicated entirely to the Dreamer Program - seventy thousand dollars. I think she knew, even though Alzheimer's robbed her of her mind, I think Rosemary knew what is really important and what really lasts. And so do we.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ Information on the size and construction of Herod's Temple can be found in most bible dictionaries.

² These lyrics, penned by Paul McCartney are from "The End" which was the last full song track of *Abbey Road* (1969).

³ Tony Snow's essay can be found on line at Christianity Today's website. Here is the link to it.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/july/25.30.html?start=2>

⁴ Ibid.