

## **“The Meaning and Value of Life”**

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Okay, here's how it was last week, I was on vacation the entire week and Susan and I had our two grandsons with us. Yesterday was their birthday, they turned seven. It was a busy week with just Susan and I taking care of the two boys. Susan went to work on Wednesday and Thursday so it was up to me to take care of them by myself. Then mid-week I got a call from the doctor and he informed me that the mass behind my eye was Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. So, it was kind of one of those weeks. I didn't get to write a sermon, but I found one I wrote from twelve years ago and it was written for the readings for today. Here it is.

The first year of ordained ministry is the transitional diaconate. As a transitional deacon, it is a time of training for the priesthood. As a transitional deacon, I was assigned to Trinity Church New Orleans located on Jackson Avenue. It was a big church in the city and so it could afford to have a deacon and had the ministries for a deacon. Part of my training as a deacon at Trinity Church was to travel to different churches and facilities to experience their ministries. So I was sent to a mission church, an old church, a new church, and a suburban church; I visited a hospital Chaplain and a school Chaplain. I spent time with Fr. Chuck Wood at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Fr. Wood was considered the Dean of College Chaplains, at LSU for over 20 years. Fr. Wood explained that few Chaplains last very long in college ministry. He said that you have to have an infinite toleration for 18 year old freshman coming to your office distressed with the burden of “finding themselves.” Eighteen years olds live in a very enigmatic world. They have lived long enough to question the meaning and purpose

of life. They want to know what is really important, what really matters. The problem is that 18 year olds, by the very act of being 18 years old, have a constitutional inability to confront the necessary question that brings life's meaning and value into focus.

Eighteen year olds hardly ever ask: “What's to become of me when I die?” At 18, filled with the vigor of youth, death is foreign concept. Eighteen years olds are immune from death through the strength of their enthusiasm for life. Examples abound: just drive through any university campus. I am always amazed at college student's willingness to walk in front of moving cars. Also, I probably need not remind you that 18 year olds are the favorite recruits for military service in every nation of the world. What better material for a fighting force than a group that believes they are indestructible? In my own experience, I have had the difficult responsibility of conveying to a group of young people that their friend would not survive a car wreck, in fact, the boy was already brain dead. I could tell by their response that what I was telling them was totally contrary to their belief system: that 18 years olds do not die.

One last observation about 18 year olds, some people remain 18 years old for more than a year and some for 5, 10, even 20 years or more. Some people live well into middle age without ever broaching the question: “What's to become of me when I die?” When a person fails to face their own finitude, “life consists in the abundance of his possessions.” It is only when faced with leaving everything that one has accumulated in this world that the worth of those things can

be honestly evaluated. It is only when faced with death that life begins to have meaning. It is only when death becomes a conscious reality that our choices in life take on new clarity. When faced with death we choose to believe either that life is absurd or that life is a gift from God. If life is absurd, we live without Faith or Hope. Life is a time between cradle and grave which only has meaning in so far as we give it meaning. Like the preacher in Ecclesiastes we can give ourselves over to the pursuit of pleasure, or great works, or wine, or laughter, or wealth. We will find, as he did, that “all is vanity and a striving after wind.”

You can choose to believe that life is a gift from God. Life is a pilgrimage with a purpose and a goal. You can believe that your existence and those things that really matter, that are really important are given their value by someone greater than you. And that your job is to have faith and to live by grace. Of course, you cannot taste, touch or measure grace and you cannot see or feel or weigh faith. You cannot prove God, you can only encounter him. God will reveal meaning in this world; you choose to accept or reject it.

If I were to take the body of our precious Lord off the cross for you, if I were to show you the wounds in his hands and feet, if I showed you the gash in his side, the blood and sweat on his face, if I showed you all this would you understand its meaning? What you would see and touch would be the lifeless body of a man in his mid-thirties. You would see torn flesh and bodily trauma to such an extent, that the human organism could no longer sustain life. What I could show you, what I could prove, is that a man died on a cross. What it means to me I can only tell you about, what it means to you I can only hope

for. By grace, I have come to believe that the man Jesus is also the Son of God. I believe that he was crucified, died, and was buried and on the third day he arose from the dead. I believe that his life, death, and resurrection give meaning to my life, that although I will die, in Jesus, I shall live. I believe this by grace through faith. My faith gives meaning to my life. Faith gives value to the things of this world: my life, my family, and my work. But equally important, my faith allows me to face my death with hope. I believe I will not be forsaken when I breathe my last. The eyes of faith have given me a different vision of death than the world sees. For those who have faith in Jesus Christ, death is not the final word. The final word is resurrection, and then comes life eternal. With this vision of death my life has new meaning and the things of this world have their true value.

My friends, we are all going to die. How we face that inevitable moment will depend on what we believe about life. We live in a world of vanities or a world of grace. If life is absurd, then the loss of self in death means the end of everything. In an absurd world not only is the death of a person tragic, but life itself is a tragedy. Life is futile, a vanity of vanities and a chasing after the wind. But for those who hold fast to their faith, God has redeemed even death. The tragedy of death is a passing woe. It is an imitation of Christ who overcame death and sin. Life in abundance awaits those who follow Jesus even into the jaws of death. Jesus gives meaning and purpose to life: Life in good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over. Life after death, but also life before death, life with meaning and purpose and value and joy, even in adversity, life worth celebrating, at 18 or at any age. Amen.