

“What Is Your Life?”

a sermon by

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Text: “Yet, you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (James 4:14).

Sometime ago I came across a speech made to a group of ministers and other church leaders by Bill Hybels, who is the pastor of the Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago. The Willow Creek church is a congregation of 6,500 people that attracts 17,000 people each week to its worship services. In his address Hybels said that he believed that the local church was the hope of the world. “Who else,” he asked “other than the local church is going to help millions of people? Who other than the local church can reach out to the unemployed and the disillusioned? Who else other than the church has the courage to tell a trembling world that there is a sovereign God who is still in charge?” Hybels went on to say that if the church today were ever going to be revolutionized, it would need something that is in short supply today and that is the courage to take risks. In speaking of courage, Hybels cited two examples: one from the Bible; the other from contemporary history.

The person that he cited from the New Testament was a man named Joseph of Arimathea, who was a secret follower of Jesus and also a member of the Jewish San Hedrin. He was a

wealthy man with a great deal of prestige and he was very cautious. But after the crucifixion of Jesus, Hybels said Joseph threw caution to the wind. He went to the Roman officials and demanded the body of Christ in order to give Jesus Christ a proper burial. Hybels wonders what it was that gave this cautious follower of Jesus the power to risk wealth and status to become a disciple of Christ. Hybels concluded that watching Jesus' death on the cross--had a powerful effect on Joseph of Arimathea. As he watched a sinless man set aside all the power that had been given to him in order to atone for the sins of humankind, Joseph found something in himself that he had not discovered before--the courage not to waver when God asked him to do something that was difficult.

The person that he cited from contemporary life was Nelson Mandela, who spent twenty-seven years in prison for his opposition to apartheid in South Africa. After his release he was elected President of South Africa and remains today one of the most important voices for racial peace and reconciliation in the world. When white South Africans first arrested Nelson Mandela, he told the court that convicted him: "Ending apartheid is a cause for which I would gladly give the rest of my life and a purpose for which I will gladly die." Nelson Mandela's courage, integrity, and commitment led to a new day in South Africa.

I.

The Scripture Lesson this morning is taken from the Book of James. Through the centuries the Book of James has occupied a rather tenuous place in the canon of the New Testament. Martin Luther called it an "Epistle of straw." He believed that the Book of James taught a view of salvation by works and Luther worked hard to have it removed from the New Testament, along with the Book of Revelation.

No one is entirely certain who is really the author of this book. The traditional view is that the author is James, the brother of Jesus. Certainly he held a high place in the Jerusalem church, but there are other theories of authorship as well.

One thing is not disputed. The Book of James stresses the importance of human action. "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone," writes the author of the book of James, "Faith without works," he continues, "is dead"(James 2: 24-26). However, it is not hard to imagine that this stress on the importance of works was not the only thing that got this small book of the Bible in hot water. The Book of James contains a scathing attack on wealthy people who ignore the poor. "Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you" (James 5:1-6). It is also a book that speaks to the damaging effect of gossip and mistruth. James speaks of the power of the human tongue to hurt and destroy. Just as a small fire can destroy a whole forest, so, says James, the tongue is able to inflict terrible damage. He is even so bold as to say this: "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless" (James 1:26).

It is this intense practicality that draws me to the Book of James. So often so many of us have a hard time making up our minds. We think we believe in God and Christ, but we are not sure. We want to be more involved in the church, but we have so many other interests. James

focuses for us the question in a somewhat different way. He doesn't ask us our opinion. He knows that a person can avoid that question. He asks instead, "What is your life?" You may avoid making up your mind, but eventually you will have to make up your mind. You will have to choose whether to be married or remain single. You will have to choose which vocation you wish to pursue. You will have to decide whether to have children or not. There are, you see, some forced decisions. We may not always be able to make up our minds, but we cannot avoid living. We live one way or the other.

III.

For one thing, what is your life with reference to your faith in God? Do you believe in a God who not only has created you, but who has redeemed you, and who works in your life to bring meaning and light even when there is only great darkness. It is one thing to believe in God when everything in your life is going well. But what happens when trouble comes into your life--devastating, crushing, and overwhelming? What do you do then? Will you be ready?

Several years, when I was at Princeton Seminary for a seminar, I visited with Bill Harris, who was the archivist at the Seminary library. He showed me a famous painting that was part of the Seminary's archives. It was a painting of Abraham Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 that freed the slaves. Along with Lincoln was William Seward, the Secretary of State. Seward later commented that Lincoln had told him that some years before he had made a compact with Almighty God that if God ever gave him the opportunity to free the slaves in this country, he would not let that opportunity pass. Abraham Lincoln was a person of faith who believed in God and when the moment of destiny came to him, he was ready to make up his life.

One of the struggles I often encounter with young adults in this church has to do with finding some meaning in their work. There is a huge difference between a job and a vocation. A job can offer a lot of money, success, and things, but it will never offer any real sense of fulfillment. Albert Camus, the great French existentialist, once wrote a series of essays he entitled *The Myth of Sisyphus* in which he compared modern life to the Greek mythological figure by the name of Sisyphus. He had been condemned by the gods to roll a stone up a hill each day. But just as Sisyphus gets to the top of the hill, the stone rolls down, and he has to begin again. That is the way a lot of people are living their lives today. They go to work, come home, go to bed, get up the next day, and begin all over. They are like Sisyphus rolling that stone up that hill without any real sense of hope or future.

I think Bill Hybels was right when he said that if the church was ever going to be revolutionized today, it will be because there are people who have the courage to take risks for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Some of us are still trying to make up our minds. But what about our lives? At some point we are going to have to make up our minds about what kind of world we live in and what kind of people we want to be. Sigmund Freud, the great psychiatrist, once spoke of what he called "this senseless life." He was haunted by anxiety about death and the meaninglessness of

life. Contrast that with the Apostle Paul, who though in prison, could write to his friends, "Rejoice in the Lord always: again I say, Rejoice."

You may have the luxury of saying that on many things you have not made up your mind, but you will not have that luxury in terms of your life. What is your life?

Amen!