

Scheduled to Death With Good Things

Text: Joshua 4:6; 24:15; Psalm 78:4-7; Matthew 18:14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

There has been a long debate about when life begins. There are those who say that life begins at the moment of conception. I think John Calvin argued that the soul was invested in the fetus at 40 days. (On most things he was smarter than that.) Others say that life begins at actual birth. It is an ancient debate and it continues into our contemporary situation. But, I tend to agree with the person who said life begins when the last kid is out of the house and the dog dies... (Your laughter is all too revealing.)

Raising children is a very, very great task and responsibility. It takes the very best that we have of our time and our energy and our resources, and it is not easy, and it's not getting any easier. I think that it becomes more difficult. As I have the luxury of being in the position of a grandparent, I can now from safe distance watch my own children raise their children, and I honestly believe that they are much better parents than I was. I don't even think I knew that I was supposed to *be* a parent. After all, I was in the Lord's work, you know. But, I have the privilege of watching my children in those marvelous years when they have adolescents, and I have a couple who are dealing with two-year-olds. So that whole spectrum is rather interesting to me to observe. I think that it is much more difficult than when I grew up and when I was raising my children, not only because there are more perils and pitfalls available, but also because there are more wonderful options and opportunities available, and I recognize the possibility of being scheduled to death with good things.

I knew that I would probably be preaching in September on opening Sunday, and it was already in June when *Time* magazine came out with a cover that caught my eye and gave me today's sermon. I knew in June this is what I would deal with. The June 12 issue has a cover with a Little Leaguer on it, in his helmet, swinging a bat, his tongue out, Michael Jordan style, and the cover says *Sports crazed kids: Year 'round play, summer clinics, pushy parents - is this too much of a good thing?* Well, it's a typical media type of presentation; not everybody is like the people who are described here and there are some pretty extreme cases in terms of the time invested and the money invested and the obsessional level with which it is pursued. But, nonetheless, I knew from my own observation that there are

many wonderful things that are available to children and young people today and I sense that it is not so easy to know how to set the priorities and determine the agendas in order that there might be balance and in order that that which is done would be life-enhancing and not, on the other hand, life-defeating.

In the article there is one paragraph that I thought I would share with you. After recounting all of this tremendous outlay of money and time and energy and commitment, the writers say,

So, what are parents to do? We do what Americans have always done. This is, after all, a country that systematizes. We create seminars on how to make friends, teach classes in grieving, and make pet-walking a profession. In that light, Greg Heintzman's praise of unstructured play seems almost un-American. Any activity, no matter how innocent or trivial or spontaneous, can become specialized in America. So, if our children are to have sports, we will make leagues and teams, write schedules and rule books, publish box scores and rankings, hire coaches and refs, buy uniforms and equipment to the limit of our means. We will kiss our weekends goodbye and maybe more than our weekends.

That is a voice from the broader culture and, as I said when I saw it last June, I thought there is a word there for the people of God, because we have not only the ongoing responsibility to do what we can to protect our children and ourselves from the perils and pitfalls that are open, but also from the multitude, the plethora of good things hereby we can be scheduled to death, and find that we are being determined by all of those things that play upon us rather than determining our own lives, the course of our lives, the way we spend our days, our time, and our resources. And so, this morning I simply want to engage in some consciousness-raising with you. I don't have any special wisdom. I just think that together we need to be very self-aware and self-conscious about that to which we give our lives, and how we structure, to the extent that it is possible, the lives of our children and our youth. And I want to say, first of all, that we should be intentional about it. We should be self-aware and self-conscious; we ought to have thought about it in order that we are doing that which we intend to do, that which we really want to do, that which is reflective of the things that we believe most deeply and value most highly. We should be conscious; we ought to live consciously.

There's a story told of Jesus and the Gospel of Thomas, that he saw a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day, and gathering sticks on the Sabbath day could get one stoned. But Jesus, in typical fashion, said to him, "If you understand what you're doing, blessed are you. But, if you don't understand what you're doing, you are cursed," for Jesus knew that the law of the Sabbath was not simply an external legalism to be observed, but it should come out of the inward motivation of the heart. If you know what you're doing, even though you are breaking the law, if there is an intentionality about it for a proper purpose, then

you're blessed. But, if you're just willy-nilly without even thinking about the Sabbath or knowing what the Sabbath is all about, you're cursed, and to live without intention, without self-knowledge and awareness is to be cursed.

So, that's simply the first thing that I want to say this morning, on a day of new beginnings, to have us for a moment ask ourselves, "What are our priorities, and do our activities reflect our values and the things that we really want to be about - for ourselves and for our children and our grandchildren?"

Raising that question, I want to put in a word for the programming in of those things that point to the spiritual dimension, the shaping of the life, the mind and the heart of ourselves, of our children, and our grandchildren, because in our day, with our freedoms, with our affluence, and with that plethora of opportunities that are out there, it is very easy to let slide the things that require a certain discipline and commitment and I think especially in a place like Christ Community where no one hounds you to do anything, where we have majored in an attitude of grace. One of the nicest compliments that we receive here, and it comes again and again, is the compliment, "Most of my life I went to church because it was Sunday and I felt that I *ought* to go, and now I look forward to Sunday in order that I *may* go to church." That's beautiful. That's I want it to be. That's the way it should be.

I met a friend this week whom I hadn't seen for a while; he'd been traveling, stopping at a child's home in another part of the country and the son-in-law said to him, "Do you want to go to church with us Sunday?" And he said, "What is it? How is it?" The son-in-law said, "I don't think you'd like it. I can hardly stand it, but I go for little Johnny."

I don't want you here for Johnny's sake. If you can't be here because this place is reflective of who you are and what you believe and what you feel, then you ought not to be here for the sake of your child, because your child will pick it up in a minute. Your child will know.

I always think of a friend of some years ago. I remember how angry she was as she spouted out the fact that she went to church every Sunday, every morning and every evening, and she had a bad back, to boot, and she had to sit on a straight chair back of the choir, but she said, "I went every Sunday, every service, to set an example for my children and as soon as they grew up and got out of the house, I don't think any of them has ever been to an evening service, and they hardly make morning." She was so angry, not really because they weren't going, but because she had put in all that effort going when she didn't want to go, so finally when they got out of the house, they simply did what she always wanted to do because they *knew* what she really wanted to do! Of course.

This place is not a place to come for the sake of your children unless it reflects your heart and your passion. Then, your children will find this to be a fine place

that will be positive, that will give them good experiences. So, a place like Christ Community, a place of grace, where you're not hounded, where you're welcomed whenever you show up and never questioned when you don't, is a place where you really need to be mature enough and responsible enough to make those decisions and to make them in such fashion that there will be the spiritual formation of your children as well as your own lives.

I think it's so important that we are authentic and consistent in the exercise of our spiritual discipline. I want to tell you a little story. I was a Professor of Preaching at one time, a very short time, and the textbooks say never to make any personal references, but then I don't do anything else I was taught in the seminary, either, so I'll tell you a little of my own story.

Growing up as a kid, my home was so devout and so serious about it all that, for me, I absolutely was saved by going to the public school. Christian education advocates say that it shapes a Christian, biblical world and life view, and if you send your child to the public school, they won't get that. Well, in my case, I needed enough fresh air to breathe and a little light because I was so shaped in my home and in my church that it was in the public school that I had any kind of exposure to anything else. For me, it was saving. But, as a kid, all I wanted to do was play ball. Now, my parents were so devout and so consistent in my spiritual nurture. There wasn't anything of church life I didn't ever attend. They did make one little sortie into the cultural field when they tried to give me music lessons, piano lessons. I sat there and I doodled, and I would go week after week and I made no progress and finally, thank God, the teacher was a Christian, who called my mother and said, "In good conscience, I can't take your money anymore."

My mother said, "Dicky, you're going to be sorry," and I said, "I really believe you," and I am, but I just didn't want ... I wanted to play ball.

In the ninth grade, the superintendent of the schools, a very rather austere man who intimidated the daylights out of us, pulled me out of class. Now what? Well, it so happened the week before it was the opening day of baseball practice, but it was also the tryouts for the spring play which he directed for the junior high, every spring. Big deal. And I didn't show up. I went to baseball practice. He pulled me aside because, as a matter of fact, he was trying to say to me, "You need to be broadened, Boy. I'm going to talk to you about values." He asked me who were the heroes of the Kalamazoo Maroon Giants a year or two or three ago. Well, I did know some of them. But, he was saying to me, "You're not cultivating a broad enough spectrum." It was an honest attempt. It was good. But, I still went out for baseball.

There was one time in the ninth grade when I *just* made the starting five. Now, this was a small school and you have to be really poor not to make the team, but I *just* made it because I wasn't a very good athlete. The coach was my salvation. He was a fallen Catholic, shanty Irish, had a good sense of humor; he liked me very

much and I liked him very much. He knew I was a good student, he had me in math, but he would always tease me about my piety and that was so healthy for me. On Tuesdays I had to go to Catechism. Now, when you're hanging on by your fingernails to stay on the first team and you have to miss one practice a week, that's tough. We'd take a shower on Monday night and he'd say, "Well, Charlie (everybody called me Charlie), say a 'Hail Mary' for me tomorrow night and I hope you start Friday."

Well, we could handle that. Then one noon hour at the table I told my mother and father that next week I couldn't go to Catechism because we had one game on a Tuesday night all season and I, of course, had to go to the game. Guess what? I went to Catechism. It wasn't a big argument. It wasn't even an argument!

I tell you that a lot of years later, and I can tell you that I think my parents were wrong. I think they should have let me play that game. But, I never rebelled and I honor them to this day because they were simply being consistent. They were totally authentic, and they never asked of me what they had not first modeled out for me, and I can say I think they should have let me play ball, but in their good judgment, I went to Catechism.

I have been very conscious of the fact that I have not been able to replicate with my children the way I was raised. I didn't even try. I mean, it wouldn't have worked anyway, but I didn't even try because I knew that what they did was the reflection of the authenticity of their heart and their passion, and if I would try to replicate that, my heart wouldn't be in it. I would be a slave to a particular mode that wasn't really mine, even though it had been that to which I was raised. I had to make my own way with my own children, stammering and stumbling along, but trying to be at least honest and authentic. And it seems to me that is key, the spiritual disciplines, and they are disciplines, take discipline, and while in this place that is left to your own mature judgment to pick and to choose, to engage or not engage, I want to encourage you to be self-aware, self-conscious, deliberate, authentic, and then committed to it.

There are fifty-four involved in our Worship Center program for young children and, again, I use this as an illustration. It is very unusual. I want to say in all my years of ministry, I have never known a committed group of people who come back here year after year after year in a beautifully conceived educational nurturing experience. But, they can only do it if the children are there. And if it is to be a genuine educational experience, then there has to be consistency, a regularity. The curriculum is set out in order to shape and to form the child, but it's conceived as a whole, and I think, I have to say to you we'll have probably the record attendance down there today and then it will drop off.

Now, in my courses, my adult courses, I usually have about 50 the first time, and 25 the second time, but that's because I'm the kind of teacher I am and deal with the kind of esoteric stuff I do. But, that's not an excuse for down there. They are

teaching and leading the children week after week after week in a well-conceived program. It does take the kind of discipline that it takes to make the Striker soccer team. When I saw the *Time* article I thought I want to call my people to consciousness about being self-aware, self-conscious, intentional, authentic, and then committed.

Israel is still a people of God because they continued to tell their story. There's no magic in it. They were on the threshold of entering the Promised Land and Joshua, their leader said to a leader from every tribe, "Take a stone out of the river bed and make a stack of stones on the other side as a sign so that when your children say, 'What do these stones mean?' you have a story to tell them."

I love Psalm 78. The second verse can be translated, "I will tell you a story with a meaning." That's precisely what is happening in the lower level today. A story with a meaning. Why? So that they may come to set their hope in God. It's beautiful. And, of course, we have the image of Jesus who says, "Bring them to me because the kingdom of God is made up of the likes of them." And as Bob said to all of you, you are a child of God. So, let me simply invite you today to do as Joshua did. They got into the Promised Land and they had been pretty slipshod about everything, but this was the time for covenant renewal and he said to them, "You choose. But, as for me and my house, we're going to get into this thing." I invite you to do the same.