November 1, 2020 — Life Well Lived

The story is told of an encounter between a young person about to strike out for fame and fortune and an older wiser person. The two were sitting on the porch of the elder's house. The worldly gent slowly rocked in his chair and whittled a piece of wood. The younger fidgeted greatly, and looked about wishing for something exciting to happen. The mature gent quietly looked at his young companion and asked, "well, you're getting older now, so what is your plan for the future?" "I will learn my trade," said the brash youngster. The wise craftsman returned to his work and simply asked, "Oh, and then what?" "Well, I guess then I'll get a job." After a short pause the whittler repeated, "oh, and then what?" “Then I shall buy a house,” said the young man confidently. “Never looking up from his piece of wood, the old whittler asked, “oh, and then what?” "Well," said the young dreamer, "then I'll get married." The whittler was now very interested in the conversation, but simply asked, "oh and then what?" "Well, then we'll have children, I guess." By this time, the young dreamer was becoming very agitated and was pacing about on the porch. The old gent returned to his whittling, but the question came again, "oh and then what?" "Well, then I guess I will have to work hard to support our family." By this time, the young man was becoming very annoyed with this simple whittler and his inane questioning, but the refrain continued, "oh and then what?" "Well, then I'll make my fortune," the young man declared triumphantly. Yet, that was still not enough, "oh and then what?" came the question again. "Well, then I'll retire and live a life of leisure." "Oh and then what?" Now he was quite angry with this silly old man, and flippantly declared, "well, then I guess I will die." The old craftsman stopped his rocking, and looked deep into the young dreamer's eyes and with bitting clarity simply asked, "oh and then what?"

The question hangs in the air, suddenly bringing everything into focus. The fact is, we all are likely to face that final ‘oh and then what’ moment. George Bernard Shaw once remarked, “the figures regarding death are quite remarkable. One out of one people die.” The question is, what difference does that awareness make? What do we want that final moment to hold and how ought we to live in light of an eternity that stretches before us. The Psalmist prays to God, “Lord, teach us to number our days that we might gain a heart of wisdom.” At some level, that is the very reality of our lives. I want to suggest to you today that the task of the Christian life is that we might live well enough in this moment that we give evidence to the eternity that we proclaim.

NT Wright argues that “you can divide theories about human behavior into two: either you obey rules imposed from the outside, or you discover the deepest longing of your own heart and try to go with them. Most of us wobble about between the two, obeying at least some of the rules either because we think God want us to or because of social convention, but reverting to pursuing our own dreams, our own fulfillment, when given the chance.” The thing is, neither gives witness to the faith we proclaim in this place. In this place, we speak about being poor in spirit, mourning, meekness, hungering and thirsting for justice, and all the rest, not as a rule and most assuredly not as the deepest desire of our hearts. We lift up them up as the pattern of a life well lived. A life that in that final, oh and then what moment will be able to rest securely. The message of the New Testament is neither a new listing of rules to be obeyed nor an invitation to self-indulgence. Instead, it is a “call . . . to a type of character . . . to be human in this particular way.”

That way of living can be seen in these qualities listed by Jesus for us: poor in spirit, mourning, meekness, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemaking. Those are qualities lived into over time, qualities not rules to be obeyed, and most assuredly not the natural response of our hearts. We need to practice these qualities. I find myself remembering my childhood and the way we would ‘play house.’ We put on clothes that were much too big for us, and wandered about doing the things we saw our parents doing, practicing for the time we would live into adulthood. I want to suggest that maybe that is what Christian life looks like: we mark the lives that seem to embody these qualities, and we imitate until it seems to fit, until becomes second nature. At some level, that is what today is about, marking the saints of our faith is and reminding ourselves of these very qualities, reminding ourselves of what a live well lived looks like.

I think of Walt Green, the pastor who taught my confirmation class. I think of his gentle hands, his loving smile and his caring for each of us. Walt Green is unlikely to be remembered centuries from now, but he lived and walked by faith. He showed me the way of faith by his gentle and loving spirit. He spoke the word of faith to me by his teaching and his preaching. His very being called me to a better way. I think of Gary Locklear, a saint of our Annual Conference, whose live ended too soon. During his service of remembrance, we were asked to think about a word that embodied his life. With no hesitation, I wrote gentle giant. He was a man who reminds me of what faith can be. My brothers and sisters, we need those heroes for ourselves, and we need to hear the call to become those heroes for generations yet to be.

All Saints Day is a day of remembrance, and a day to commit ourselves to being saints, being witnesses for those we may not ever meet, those we see everyday, and those who look to us as signs of hope.

Do Lord Remember Me tells the reminiscences of an old country preacher nearing the end of his life. At one point, the narrator, Joshua, remembers a time in his own youth when his father, also a preacher, became down hearted and seemed to lose his faith. The father had lost three children, and the loss of the last one hit him especially hard. He took to drinking and cared very little for the life of the church. One day, an elder from the church came to talk to Charles, Joshua's father. The elder said, "'Charles, I been knowing you since before you knowed yourself. I knowed your daddy before you was a twinkle in his eye, and I remember ol' Tremble, your grandaddy, too. Didn't think too highly of him though.'

"Joshua lay on his stomach in the dirt, eyes closed, barely breathing. He knew that when the old folks started off reciting your family history, they hadn't come to pass the time of day.

"'You can skip all that, Brother Emory,' he heard Poppa say roughly. 'Get to the point.'

"There was another long silence, so long that Joshua began wondering if Brother Emory, old as autumn, had just vanished like the green grass.

"'And your granddaddy and daddy always had manners,' Brother Emory finally said in a calm rebuke.

"'You come here to give me a sermon on my folks?'

"'Seems like somebody need to do some preaching to you.'

"Poppa laughed at that, but it wasn't the loving-God laugh, but more like sandpaper on an old, rough, pine board that will never get smooth no matter how much you sand it."

Brother Emory finally coming to the point of his visit tells Poppa, "I know I'm a sinner, but I always got to know that it is possible not to be. . . . An old sinner like me might not act like I done heard the words or that I'm trying to live by 'em, but you supposed to be the words and when I look at you, some of the words I may done forgot suppose to come back."

My brothers and sisters, there will someday be a moment when your life is measured, when the way you have been in this world is remembered, perhaps with a candle and the tolling of a bell, perhaps with the sound of an angel choir. How do you want to be remembered? As poor in spirit? As meek? As hungering and thirsting for righteousness? As a peacemaker? Whatever the quality you would choose to mark your life, I can promise you a life well lived is a life worth having.