

LESSONS IN LIVING

The Art of Living: Letting Go

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Revelation 21:1-7 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

I love being a minister, but it's a very strange life in a lot of ways and there are parts of my week that I really can't share with too many people. Not just the secret things, but also (laughter) unless the price is right, I keep those secrets. That was a joke. It got real silent all of a sudden. (laughter) But also the experience changes how you look at life. For example, whenever I say I had a funeral last week, most people, very commonsense responsible people, say that must be very depressing to do funerals. What you almost can't say, although I'm trying to say it, is that when you do this job long enough you get a sense that we die. (laughter) It takes a while for it to soak in; it's like a firefighter at some point realizes things are flammable, they catch on fire, and they are not shocked by it. We are a culture in basic denial of the last things, of things like death, aging. It makes it very hard and traumatic sometimes to take that part of our experience in, but it really is a part of nature, a part of life, and in the grand scheme of things, much of the time it is very beautiful. People are nicer to each other at a funeral than they are ever going to be any other time. Maybe it shouldn't be that way. Sometimes you have the other stories too—people say the dumbest things to you at a funeral because they don't know what to say. Trying to make you feel better, or maybe trying to make themselves feel better by saying something that will bring it all into a simple kind of formula, which often is the last thing you need.

In New Orleans they have Dixieland Jazz funerals. You have a sense of people who live close enough to life and to their art, that they know when things are sad and they change in a way that's really hard—to sing louder, to dance harder, to trust your art, to go deeper into life. That's really what a lot of religion is about, and it sounds very strange when somebody is not trying to live the whole circle of life, but to stop and celebrate when somebody is born, and to stop and celebrate when they get married, as they age, and when they die—that ability to let go and to do it on a regular basis—the earlier we learn that art, the richer our life is going to be. I really believe that.

It's hard to be grateful if you think this coming week is owed to you. If you think when you're born that you are owed this certain trajectory of time, it is really hard to be grateful or even aware. You just expect it to be plopped out for you. But when you realize how brief your life is going to be, there is a radiance to everything. That doesn't necessarily happen at first, but the person who really counts every day as a gift, before very long, moves into a deep joy of living. The problems of life for the most part bounce off because you don't have time for an unhappy view of the world.

When you talk to families, you say that the funeral is about them. There are no templates here. Forget what other people are going to think about it. How would you want to celebrate this life, how would you want to honor this life, and people do some very strange things. Our minister of education went to a funeral a week ago where the person did graffiti, he died very early. He loved doing graffiti, so they did that to his casket. When she said that, my first instinct was to gasp, "Oh my God". But as people did that,

they got into his art and they celebrated him and what his life expressed; something deeper. And that is what we have to remember at sad times, that we are expressions of something deeper. That's what we have to trust.

There was a person who used to sit right there (points to a chair), it's empty, but that's not on purpose. Jim Mahon, former minister of First Presbyterian Church, started coming to St. Andrew's. When he realized he was going to die, we worked on his funeral more than any funeral I've seen, ever. For years we would meet for coffee and go over it and he'd change the hymns and change the prayer, and just work it, work it, work it. What he was doing was using the art he knew, this stuff he knew, worship, (gestures around at the altar) to make his death all right. So it wasn't the specific songs he was picking, it wasn't the particular prayers, it was the art of it all.

Is anybody here old enough to remember the movie "All that Jazz"? Lot of old people here, that's good. (laughter) You whippersnappers won't know what we're talking about. "All that Jazz" was a movie about Bob Fosse, a producer and choreographer from Broadway. He is dying in the movie; he has heart problems and he is dying and the movie goes between the beeping machines, and the hospital setting, and his dreams. What his dreams are doing is putting the broken pieces of his life together. He's doing choreography on his life. The different people he couldn't work things out with are all a part of his last days. You realize as the movie goes on that the last chorus line is going to be him dying and the most beautiful moment in the movie is going to be when he is slipping away. That is in many ways the heart of religion when it comes to letting go, turning your life into this grand song or dance, whatever your image is of that.

We are looking at Revelation today. As I have said before, the one thing you need to remember whenever I preach on Revelation is that it is not *Revelations*. It's singular. Revelation means taking the lid off something. Apocalypse in Greek means to take the cover off of something. The purpose is to see what the inner workings are. That's what art does. Art strips off the extraneous things and presents to us the heartbeat of life. What scripture is doing in many cases, particularly the Apocalypse, the last books, talks of a culture that's dying. You see that in the Jewish scripture, the Christian scripture. John is now very old; his friends are gone. The wonderful people who taught him the way of love are gone. He already sees the church getting corrupt—you see that in the stories he's going to tell. He sees that the empire is imploding. We are looking at the punch line of Revelation. I'm in a way cheating you a bit here, but I figured you didn't want to hear the other twenty-something chapters which come before that. I know some of you have football teams and would be gone anyway. (laughter) But realize what John has just done in poetic form is present the despair of a dying nation. That's what you are seeing when you see all those poems and the crazy imagery. It's coming from a broken heart. But the purpose of it is what we are looking at today and it's going to be hard. It's like hearing the punch line when you haven't heard the joke. Have you ever had someone say to you, "Have you heard the joke about..." and they tell you the punch line. Always say "Yes, yes, I've heard that" because if you don't say yes, then you have to listen to it and you have already heard the punch line. So this could be one of those mornings for you.

I've seen a new heaven and a new earth. Every teardrop has been dried.

Again, you should be putting that in the context of the current situation in the United States of America, and your personal relationships. This is art that is coming from the very depths of things. It doesn't get any worse in some ways, but it also doesn't get any better. When you remember what life is about. When you are able to let go of things. Revelation is a beautiful song if you understand the point is to get to hope beyond the catastrophe. To let go of the hope so that you can get back to what you have lost. That's the unpleasant thing a prophet has to do. We want to live in the past and the older we get the more likely we

are going to be more comfortable with that. That's a devastating way to approach the end of our lives. What religion *can* do is to teach us early on to start letting go; through rituals, through songs, through prayers, so that we can say yes when it goes into a new situation. It's not so pretty when the person on the throne, whoever that is—it doesn't say who it is, says "I make all things new". That sounds really pretty, but when it is your world that's being made new, and you like the old stuff, it's very painful. We don't want that. So what the book is doing is both helping us let go of what will never come back to life again and trusting that that which gave us life in the first place is still at work in this.

When John says "I am the alpha and the omega", it can be one of the most comforting verses in scripture; to say whatever it is that is leading you into your death also gave you birth. When we look at Revelation we have a tendency to think that it's the last days, the end of everything. It is also the beginning of everything. It's in some ways the end, but it's also the first principles of things. People try to make sense of life intellectually and it becomes a joke. Terrible things happen and people try to make sense of that with little human stories. In these last few years, every time there's a hurricane you have people in the church saying the reason there is a hurricane is because of who? God, but who is being punished? It's gays and lesbians is the reason hurricanes are going into certain places. The question I've started asking people is "Where's the drought coming from then?" (laughter) If a drought is also this horrible thing, then maybe Texas needs more gay people. (laughter) Isn't that what logic would say? If hurricanes are coming because of gays and lesbians..... (laughter) See, any way you go with that you go crazy. What art does is go deeper and discover the heartbeat of things; things that aren't going to make sense intellectually. Your death will not make sense to you; I don't care if you live to be one hundred and fifty. You are going to probably feel like, I've just got here. It depends on how much pain is associated with it. It's not easy to let go.

Think of the dominoes. Did you ever line up dominoes and you push one and they all go down? If you lift up any of the dominoes to see what happened and you study it, and you put it under the microscope and you say what in this domino caused that, you are not going to figure it out. It's not in the dominoes; it's something that's happening through the dominoes. That's true of your life as well. You can come up with dramatic reasons why good things happen, dramatic reasons why bad things happen, but really what you are needing is to find that life, that heartbeat, and to trust it through the changes of life. The way John puts it throughout this book is to talk about the fountain of life, the source. What is the source out of which we come? What is the source that sustains us? Can we trust that when it takes us into areas we have not seen before?

Scripture really doesn't talk that much about the afterlife. The church talks a lot about the afterlife, and that's why some of the funerals are so horrific. You are sitting there trying to come to terms with this wonderful friend that you've lost and they are pasting poems on top of it. It's drawing closer into life. It's realizing that the same song that gave you birth is still being sung through your life and there is no reason not to believe that it's being sung through your death. The song that began before you were born is not limited to you and it doesn't end with you. Something deeper is coming through your life. We are bridges to something else. Have you ever thought of yourself that way? That you are not an object, you are a bridge; you are a transition? When you were in the womb—you may not remember this, (laughter) your little body recreated the story of life on this planet. You had a tail, little gills—like I say, some of you may not remember that; the lighting wasn't real good. (laughter) But that means your body is carrying within it information that we just discovered a couple of hundred years ago. Your body already knew it. What John is doing is saying when the foundation shifts and you cannot find your bearing, trust the life within you.

I love the stoics. I don't always give them credit so that you won't get tired of hearing them, but Marcus Aurelius is one of my favorite thinkers of all time. This is how he talks about this:

Think of the doctors now dead and gone who knit their brows over the sick. Fortune tellers who told the fate of others, philosophers with fine speeches on death and the life to come. All those who you have known who, many after they have stood by the graves of others, were quickly borne away.

Have you ever realized when you are sitting there feeling sorry for everybody else who is going to die, that maybe you are on that same ride too? If we are not careful, we think of ourselves as being outside of time and it creates a sense of being left behind, of being separated. What John is going to try to do is help us feel those connections again. Listen to the rest of Marcus Aurelius.

For brief is the span of a human being. What yesterday was a formless atom, tomorrow perchance will be dead and gone. Pass thy allotted time as nature would have thee. Then depart in peace like the olive which ripely falls, praising the power which gave it birth and thankful to the tree that bore it.

I love that image. We are beings of transition and so it is very important for us to trust the changes in life and when we hear these words: "I am making all things new," to not panic.

There are two ways to take this verse. One is that it's external and there is something supernatural that's going to sweep in from the outside. The other, which I think is infinitely more beautiful, is that it's saying that this is already true. Already at the heart of your experience, what gave you birth is still inside of you, and what you consider to be your death is not the death of that intelligence. Trust it, trust life, trust the change.

I truly believe that our biggest fear is not death, but separation. If we knew we weren't going to be severed from one another, that we weren't going to be alone in a box with dirt on our face. Our image of death is terrifying. You are alone, in a box, all dressed up, not a lot of elbow room there, looks a little boring for all eternity. What if our birth is actually not really separate? What if we are united in ways we just don't know? Listen to what this person says. This is Marcus Aurelius again.

Everything harmonizes with me which is harmonious with you, O Nature. Nothing for me is too early or too late which is in due time for you. There is one light of the sun, though it is interrupted by walls, mountain, and infinite other things. There is one common substance though it is distributed among countless bodies which have their several qualities. There is one soul though it is distributed among several natures and individual limitations. There is one intelligent soul though it seems to be divided.

I believe this is what Jesus came to teach us. I believe that when the church said "Jesus is the only son of God", they lost the punch line of Jesus' teaching. What Jesus came to say is that "I am that, but so are you." In John it's very clear, it says right here: "The people who don't quit will inherit this as sons and daughters." You will inherit life. What seems to be a great loss; your friends, your health, you're going to lose it all—you will lose those things but you will gain life, will inherit life. The unity for which you long is your true home and the separation is where the illusion is.

When people talk about funerals and say it must be very depressing to do that work. I wish you could see the beauty of people healing, crying, grieving, and helping one another in ways I wish we could all the

time. The truth is that great ritual of saying goodbye, of letting go, is the last great art we need to learn in life. The earlier we learn it the better. Life is change, and our home is not with the things we have lost, our home is with the nature of the change itself. We need to trust those changes and trust life, and realize that we are not orphans separated eternally. We are children.

For brief is the life of a human being. What yesterday was a formless atom tomorrow perchance will be dead and gone. Pass thy allotted time as nature would have thee, then depart in peace as the olive which ripely falls praising the power which gave it birth and thankful to the tree that bore it.
Marcus Aurelius

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