

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

Practice Dying
Ecclesiastes 7.15-17; John 10.7-10
Russ Dean, April 13, 2008



INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING:

Though I have told you that I write most sermons early on Sunday mornings – I always come to that holy time with a week’s worth of study behind me, and with a text that has turned over and over in my mind. I trust that the Spirit of God interacts with such intentional investment in scripture, germinating the thoughts and ideas that make it into my last-minute manuscripts. So, this week I have been entertaining these glorious words from John’s gospel, which I have long claimed as my favorite text: “*I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly.*” All week I have reflected on what Jesus means by an *abundant life*, and even as we began a week of vacation was considering my ironically-chosen title, “Practice Dying.” I invite you now to consider two very different approaches to life, both which are found within the texts of our scripture...

SERMON:

The plush resort at Big Sky, Montana, was Amy’s and my home for the winter of 1989-90. We served there as Chaplains of the ski resort, in the employ of the Southern Baptist Convention. (Ah... suffering for Jesus!) We have only returned for two short trips, and had been planning this adventure for over two years, so we were especially excited – finally we could introduce our boys to “our mountain,” and to a few friends who still call the shadow of the spectacular 11,000-foot Lone Peak, their home.¹ I considered the text and title of this morning’s sermon even as we began to carve up some of Big Sky’s amazing terrain last Monday, and I do try to practice what I preach – but “Practice Dying” wasn’t literally what I had in mind when our family entered the “Terrain Park” under the Swift Current chair lift. (For the uninformed I should explain that the terrain park is the ski resorts’ latest response to the never-ending request of those skiers and snow-boarders who can’t find quite enough adventure on the snow, itself.

These blockaded slopes are filled with variously shaped rails and platforms that a thrill-seeker can jump

¹ Most of our congregation knew we had been away on vacation for the past week, as it was spring break for the local public school system.

up onto and slide along, practicing balance and style, before jumping back onto the snow. I have no interest in such foolishness... But... that series of jumps did catch my attention!)

I am an adventuresome soul. And I gladly admit to a personal addiction of trying to soak up this *abundant life* in an increasing array of experiences that might fall beyond what the average adult sees as sensible for a middle-aged father of two! I might claim motorcycle racer Bill McKenna's oft-quoted motto as my own:

Life is not a journey to the grave (he says) with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well-preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside, totally worn out and proclaiming, "Wow, what a ride!"²

I think McKenna is onto something – even onto something Jesus would affirm – but please understand that your pastor is no fool. My forays into the world of adventure are always carefully calculated and modestly engaged (my wife's objections notwithstanding!) So, when the four of us (yes, Amy was there, too!) entered the terrain park I told Jackson and Bennett that we would take our first run carefully, for we had never before been on such a course, and we didn't need to "kill ourselves" on the jumps. (I think I actually used those words!)

After that well-placed and self-intended advice, I followed Jackson up the first of those hills, which rise 10-12 feet above the ski slope, and over the jumping-ramp, which is made of mounded up snow on the uphill side. He and I both barely left the ground. He proceeded on, completing all ten of the jumps, uneventfully. I remember crossing hill number two with the same tepid approach, so as I approached the third hill I urged my cautiously-adventuresome nature to "let it out," just a little. These hills are designed to be safe. The uphill approach and lip of snow allow you to get a little air and then to land on the downhill side of the mound, which is shaped specifically to provide a safe return to the snow. Honestly, this was all I had in mind. What I didn't know is that the third hill was considerably farther below the second hill, providing a more space, to build considerably more speed than I had carried into my first, wimpy jumps.

² This quotation, which I have known for several years, is found in several forms, but it is easily located on the internet, with attribution to McKenna.

You know that dream, when you are falling? Haven't you had it? You're in the air – way up in the air, and you are falling, fast, and there is nothing you can do to stop yourself? The last memory I have from the slopes last Monday is that dream. But... It was apparently not a dream – for it came to a jarring end!³ Though no one saw my fall, apparently I launched myself 12 feet or so above the ski slope itself, and completely over-jumped the landing hill – so that jarring ending was actually my body's impact into the snow, maybe 20 or 25 feet beyond the lip of the jump. I did land on my feet, because Amy found my skis firmly planted just beyond the bottom of the jump hill, but apparently it was my face which took the brunt of the contact. The blow rendered me unconscious for more than five minutes.

Though frightening, this was not a near-death experience. But since I enter the pulpit this morning with two still-slightly-blackened eyes and this little glued-together scar, it seemed too-obvious an introduction to pass up – for a sermon entitled “Practice Dying!”⁴ My next memory occurred out of time. I mean it didn't seem a long time after that impact. Nor did it come quickly after I lost consciousness. It was as if I had simply ceased to be. I have no memories of a wife screaming frantically for help. Of a child's fearful cry. No recall of ski patrol assistance, of their escort to a waiting ambulance, nor of the 45-minute ride to the emergency room. I had no fear. No panic. No pain. Only there came a subtle awareness, coming completely out of time (as if I were just coming into existence), that there were people circled above me, talking. Talking about medical conditions... Talking about medical treatments... And the slowly dawning realization that the subject of these conversations – was me!

As you can see – I'm still in one piece. As you have observed, by all obvious measures, my motor and cognitive skills are still in tact (at least as much as they ever were). My venture into the world of the unconscious was not really a near-death experience. But it is as close as I want to get in a lonnnnnng time! As I understand it – though I think it's always dangerous to put words in Jesus' mouth – here is what my

³ I have always heard that, in regard to those dreams, if you ever hit the bottom, you have died. I obviously did not hit the bottom in my dream – but I did hit the bottom!

⁴ In terms of good sermon technique, I worried that this illustration was too personal (it may have been too lengthy, as well). I have learned not to judge the value of my own sermons by comments I receive at the door, but if those comments are to be trusted at all, more people took away the illustration (and their concern for their pastor), than anything I said about the text. If this is the case, it was an error to use this experience to open the sermon. But, as I note, it was too good to pass up, given my personal experience and the title!

death-defying experience has to do with the words of Jesus that had been rumbling around my brain all week.

I believe that Jesus' challenge, exhortation, call, his command to his followers is not simply to be spiritualized – as if “*living abundantly*” only referred to a conversion experience, or some other-worldly practice of life with God. We are embodied souls, not bodies which contain our souls, so enjoying the sensual experiences of life are experiences which, literally, bring our souls in touch with the presence of God. The utterly breathtaking experience of skiing Big Sky, Montana, then, with all its thrills (though an admittedly affluent experience) may actually be a part of what Jesus had in mind when he urged his followers to *live abundantly*.⁵ Our trip reminded me of that. And a few unconscious moments were enough to remind me that every single moment we are conscious of our place in this world – that is, that we are placed in this infinite world under the watchful care of the One, the True, the Mysterious Source of Life, every single moment we live with this awareness is another opportunity to know God -- spiritually, emotionally, mentally. Every moment we are aware of our embodied soulful presence in God's world, is a moment to, physically, literally, know God. Such awareness, such living, leads to *abundant life*. It begins here and now.⁶ We hope, and trust, it is a life that extends beyond and encompasses more, than life as defined by our breathing experience.⁷

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “We are always getting ready to live, but never living.”⁸ How sad, but sadly true, of so many people. Life is always “over there.” Is always “about to happen.” Yesterday, we buried one of those rare individuals, however, who seemed to know life's secret. Who seemed to know, that *abundant life* can only be known in the “here and now.” In her eulogy, Amy said

⁵ Woody Hammett was a long-time Campus Minister, employed by the South Carolina Baptist Convention, who was also an avid and excellent snow skier. Woody always said that snow skiing was “the most sensual experience in the world.” He may be right!

⁶ These lyrics from Edwin McCain's song, “Alive,” have been important to me: “And she knows what I know: it's not all that hard to survive – you take the good and the bad and the time in between. It lets us know we're alive!.. Well get on board the rocket, step right into the front car. You know life's a roller coaster (it ain't got no safety bar!) Raise your voices up with laughter, bring it in with one big sigh, consecrated in the wonder...we're alive!”

⁷ My personal faith is unapologetically, unequivocally oriented to the present. The *abundant life* of which Jesus spoke (“eternal life” as it is sometimes translated) is not a reference to the afterlife. This text is important to me because of one sermon, preached in a 1984 revival service by the late Dr. Ken Chafin, then of Louisville, KY, who said, “Too many Christians are ready to die – but aren't ready to live.” That statement was a caricature of my own faith at that time – which was about making sure I got to heaven, and was too much disconnected from the actual realities of daily living. From that moment, the locus of my faith began to move from future to present, from heaven to earth. This has been a needed, important, rightful change. However, a present-oriented faith should not deny the legitimate place of a theology of future – including the language of hope in afterlife.

⁸ “The Living Pulpit,” entry on “Life,” p.32.

she wanted to be like Eddie Bullock when she grew up (and so do I!) – Eddie who went white water rafting in Alaska when he was 88 years old! Eddie who rode horseback in Yellowstone at 91! Eddie who attended a Queen Latifah concert at the Hollywood Bowl last year, when he was 93! Eddie who still climbed the ladder to clean his roof at 94!...

Abundant living is life lived full and free. Abundant life is a quality of living – not a quantity. For you, that might mean cruising the Blue Ridge Parkway at 35 mph, not jumping in Terrain Parks at 44! And a bath of running water may be all the white water you can stand! I am not suggesting that only thrill-seeking spirits can live abundantly. I am defending the goodness of creation and our embodiment in it. And saying to you that only when we are fully immersed in a life of earthly living, regardless what speed we may choose to travel it, will we find the abundant living that Jesus promised.

Abundant life comes to those who give themselves to full living – only to those who are willing to practice it. But here's the rub, and if you listen to Jesus long enough, you'll find that his Truth is always ironic, if not downright paradoxical – as it is today. The writer of the book we call Ecclesiastes offers a worldly wisdom: he hedges his bets so to speak, offering a jaded view of faith, suggesting cynically that the best we can do in this world is to look out for our own necks in order to squeeze one more day of breathing out of life. Isn't it strange that this word even makes it into our scriptures?⁹ For, this Preacher even commends modifying our righteousness if that is what it takes to keep from destroying ourselves! *Why should you die before your time!?*

But Jesus said it might only be in dying that you can learn to live in the first place. Such dying, then, would always be right on time. What Jesus knew was not *worldly* wisdom. It was wisdom from God, which contradicts “The Preacher’s” wisdom in every way. First, it contradicts the goal of life – which is not just living, per se. Just another day of breathing does not constitute “life” according to Jesus. Only the living which really creates “life” counts, for Jesus. His wisdom contradicts the End of life, and it also contradicts The Preacher’s Means to that life. The Preacher seems to commend any kind of living

⁹ I continue to be amazed at the character of our scripture, for its honest, real presentation of life and faith. Here is an amazing example of a “preacher” (the Hebrew word for Ecclesiastes can also be translated preacher), who offers a truly worldly wisdom. We will not learn, then, from simply repeating the claims of the Bible and claiming “the Bible says, so and so...,” for in this example it is only when we can recognize the contrast of this so-called wisdom with the wisdom of Jesus, that the texts (both of them) give life.

just to preserve another day of breathing (*Do not be too righteous... do not act too wise...*) – where Jesus says it is only when we learn to give our lives away, even literally, that we can come to know *abundant life* in its fullness. For Jesus, a life lived without righteousness, is no life at all: *only the one who will lose her/his life for the sake of the Gospel, shall find it* (Matthew 10.39)!

Madeleine L'Engle says, "To be fully human means to be willing to be alive, and that means being vulnerable... To be vulnerable means I'm capable of being hurt. The more people I love, the more I'm open to being hurt."¹⁰ Full living, *abundant living*, learns this paradox of living-with-dying, living-through-dying, living-as-dying.

The art of living, then, comes only to those who are willing to Practice Dying – also in the here and now. Dying to the "realities of sin, injustice, violence, shame and pain."¹¹ Dying to one another, in small and large ways, in figurative and literal ways.¹² *For greater love has no one that this* (Jesus said)... *that he lay down his life for his friends* (John 15.13).

Even that kind of sacrifice takes practice.

Words and popular idioms, the casual phrases we develop, are so interesting to me. I think we can learn so much from being aware of them. Consider the phrase, "I'm dying to do such and such..." Have you heard it? "I'm dying to see that new movie..." "I'm dying to have a new car..." "I'm just dying for this sermon to end so I can get to lunch!" etc... Are we really? The violence of our sad, shallow, popular culture makes it evident that too many people among and around us are, literally, dying for those things

¹⁰ "The Living Pulpit," "Life," p.33.

¹¹ The full quotation is from Stephen J. Patterson: "Christian theology must still be thought of as fundamentally eschatological. It is indeed about bring something to an end and beginning something new. In the preaching of Jesus, the person of faith receives an invitation to embody the eschaton in his or her very existence, to assert its present reality and to live it from potential into actuality. The eschaton as 'end' means the end of life lived out of the realities of sin, injustice, violence, shame and pain. But it also has an 'end,' that is, a goal. It is not a distant goal or one so remote that one must despair of ever reaching it. The end of eschatology is the Empire of God. It is reached day in and day out, in the very everyday decisions one makes to live faithfully to God." – "The Living Pulpit," "Life," p.11.

¹² Another quotation also taken from "The Living Pulpit" is from Minka Shura Sprague: "The living body, I am learning, must face death. Really. Brought to remembrance by [one] conversation, deep within my own body, I see this truth everywhere. Suddenly, I really see death in earth's cycles, Jesus' words, the chaos of institutional reconfiguration, my own aging, the relentless AIDs epidemic, struggles between European nation states, chronic poverty around our world, arbitrary value assigned to this kind of money and that kind of time, primary currencies of our lives. Death is in my face, really. These days, I am wearing death within my bones."

which cannot bring life. But there is deep truth in this expression, if only we could learn to practice it with our lives.

I'm dying for little Clara Page Kinney to grow up in this church and to learn, here, that Jesus loves her. The extent to which you and I really are willing to "die" for that to happen is the extent to which Clara¹³ will learn what that love really means.

And only when we can say, "I'm dying to know how to really live" – and when we will practice that kind of living, will it ever happen.

May it be so!

¹³ Matt and Martha Kinney brought little Clara for a service of parent/child dedication at the beginning of today's worship.