

June 26, 2022
"Right Relation to Mortality"
1 Kings 19:15-16 / Luke 9:51-62
Rev. John Pritchard

It's good to see you again, though I have to say, what a week! What a disturbing, painful, horrible week. I am not going to go there today, but before I start, I want to remind you that Christian proclamation has always punctured the pretenses of the powerful. Christians have always proclaimed a vision more true, a flourishing more to be desired, a justice more sure and worth pursuing than any "Supreme" Court.

It is incredibly important to remember the church's confession of otherwise, to claim faith as resistance, especially at the end of this week when the "Supreme" Court expanded gun rights and removed women's right to control their own bodies. So I want to share something with you I stumbled across this week.

Originally titled "Reclaiming Jesus and signed in 2018 by Christian leaders – pastors and professors and bishops, all more traditional and evangelical than I ... and yet. It is based on the Barman Declaration, a declaration of faith of German pastors in 1934 that affirms six Christian proclamations and because of those rejects six claims of Naziism. Given the decisions this week revealing an unabashed exercise of white male power, please hear this abbreviation of "Reclaiming Jesus": to control their own bodies, so hear this abbreviation:

"We are living through perilous and polarizing times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of our government and in our churches. We believe the soul of the nation and the integrity of faith are now at stake ... Therefore we offer the following six affirmations of what we believe, and the resulting rejections of practices and policies by political leaders which dangerously corrode the soul of the nation and deeply threaten the public integrity of our faith. We believe each human

being is made in God's image and likeness ... Therefore we reject the resurgence of white nationalism and racism ... We believe we are one body (in Christ) ... Therefore we reject misogyny, the mistreatment, violent abuse, sexual harassment, and assault of women ... and the oppression of any other child of God ... We believe that how we treat [the most vulnerable in society] is how we treat Christ ... Therefore we reject the language and policies of political leaders who would debase and abandon [them] ... We believe that truth is morally central to our personal and public lives ... Therefore we reject the practice and pattern of lying that is invading our political and civil life ... We believe that Christ's way of leadership is servanthood not domination ... Therefore we reject any moves toward autocratic political leadership and authoritarian rule... We believe Jesus when he tells us to go into all nations making disciples ... Therefore we reject "America first" as a theological heresy ... we reject xenophobic or ethnic nationalism that places one nation over others..."

There are truths with more power and more claim on us than the Supreme Court, so may we remember. May we remember who we are; may we remember the alternative for which we are made and to which we are called. May we be empowered to persist in pursuing it.

And now ... I had the distinct privilege and pleasure of joining you for worship the first Sunday after Easter, made doable because it was the last Sunday of the month and so worship was virtual. It was a gift to see so many of you then, as today, and a special gift to hear Lauren Ballester preach. The heart of her sermon was taking as her motto words she'd heard in a podcast: "I want to live in right relation to mortality." I want to live in right relation to mortality, which for Lauren meant living compassionately and fully, but especially honestly, honest to who she is, to whom she loves, to the love within her; living compassionately, fully, honestly in the only time to do that—now. Life passes. Life ends. So now is the time for living it rightly.

I want to live in right relation to mortality, which means, of course, living in light of the passing of our time, of the certainty of our end, of the precious, urgent, unrepeatable and irretrievable power, worth, glory, weight of now. To live in right relation to our mortality is to peer into the wealth of opportunities, the clutter of possibilities, the welter of attractive options and pleasant distractions, and discern what is important, choose what is significant, embrace what matters—while we can, before our choosing, our embracing, our life, has passed. To live in right relation with our mortality is to know that everything is *not* possible, that all possibilities are not equal, and to choose our priorities—to give what it most matters to give, to say what is most important to say, to mourn what most needs to be mourned, to cherish what is best to cherish—now, before giving and saying and mourning and cherishing pass.

It's not just our lives that pass. So do moments and all they offer. I remember one, which has become something of a cautionary parable for me. During my last year in seminary—oh so many years ago—I worked at Frankford Memorial UMC, teaching a class and helping to lead worship on Sundays, and visiting the sick and shut-ins and working with the youth on Wednesdays. One Wednesday I fell behind on my visits, so had to leave until after youth group visiting one woman who was in a hospital. When youth group was finished, though, I was tired, I had an hour's drive back to seminary, and I really wanted to watch the weekly episode of the original *Star Trek* reruns that were being aired then, so I decided to wait until next Wednesday to make that visit.

She, however, died that night, the moment to visit her lost. I had chosen what at the time seemed important to me but later seemed trivial, and I am still haunted to this day by that choice to ignore what really mattered. It's not that it's a bad thing to rest or to enjoy something or to choose to do so. It's just that that was the moment to be present to her and that moment passed as I chose something

else, something that now feels far, far lesser. That moment passed as all our moments pass—and their gifts, their opportunities, their calls pass with them.

Theologian John Caputo calls such moments “events,” and he says our great calling in life is to make ourselves worthy of the events that happen to us, worthy of such moments that come to us, to make ourselves worthy by responding to them, by savoring them or rejoicing in them or giving ourselves to answer their call for something just, something compassionate, something kind, by being present and open to them and to all they bring to, all they ask of, us.

It is such moments that the scriptures today give us, presenting precisely the urgency to choose what matters before the moment passes. In Luke’s tale, some hear Jesus’ call to follow him but display other priorities. “First let me bury my father. First let me say goodbye to those at home.” Jesus’ response to each makes clear the moment will pass, the choice is now—bury or follow, say goodbye or follow. Either way, the only moment to choose is now.

Which we also see in the story on which that Gospel tale is based, the story of the prophet Elijah calling Elisha to follow and be his successor. The story begins with Elisha plowing until Elijah interrupts by placing his stole on Elisha, ordaining him in essence. Elisha understands completely. “First let me kiss my mother and father”—say goodbye to them—“and *then* I will follow you.” Elijah makes clear, though, that this moment and its weight—its invitation, its call—will pass. “Go back,” he says, “for what have I done to you?”, meaning, what does this matter, this ordaining, this call. It’s nothing, if you choose something else.

Elisha gets the point and not only doesn’t return to life as before, but makes that impossible, slaughtering the oxen needed for plowing and barbecuing them up for others to eat—burning his bridges, as it were—and following Elijah.

Both stories rest on right relation to mortality, on the urgency created by the passing of the moment and its gift and call, on the need to prioritize, to choose

what most matters even when so many things are important. Both stories invite us to discern and embrace what is truly significant and to do so now, before the chance to do so is gone.

Living in right relation to mortality is facing that need to listen to our lives, to discern the significance there, the gift and call, and to embrace it, to choose not to let the moment pass ungrasped. All of which makes me wonder about your life, about what is calling you now, before it is too late. What is insisting to be noticed, to be savored, to be given, to be enacted, to be treasured, to be dared? In light of the moment's passing, of your time itself passing, what is it that matters? What is calling you; what is haunting you; what are you neglecting or overlooking? What will you give yourself to, give yourself for?

Frederick Buechner, almost 100 years old now, has been a novelist, a preacher, a theologian, and someone who has understood the gift of mortality, has understood the urgency, the clarity, it can bring. I have shared with you before one of my favorite passages in his writings, but it is worth sharing again:

To have the doctor tell you it is not lung cancer after all but just a touch of the flu, is in a way to be born again. For another thing, it is to be given not just your old life again, but your old life with a new sense of its pricelessness. At least for a time old grievances, disappointments, irritations, failures that had cast a shadow over your days suddenly cease to matter much. You are alive. That's all that matters, and the sheer wonder and grace of it are staggering, the sense of life as a gift, and the sense of the pricelessness of each moment, even the most humdrum. The taste of fresh bread. The trip to the laundry. The walk with a friend. They were nearly taken away for good. Someday they will be taken away for good. But in the meantime they are yours. Treasure them for what they

will not be forever. Treasure them for what, except by God's grace, they might never have been at all.

Treasure them, which means, notice them, give thanks for them, give yourself to them, forget about all that matters so little and choose what truly stirs your heart and soul; choose what will bless you by giving you some great gift or by calling you to give some great gift, even yourself.

Living in right relation to mortality is to take to heart that moments pass, days pass, life passes, so now is the time to choose. Do we give ourselves to grievances, disappointments, irritations, failures, to distractions and clutter? Do we give ourselves to living, to its preciousness, to its simple delights, to its significant moments that bless or call us? Do we make ourselves worthy of the moments that come to us, of the life that is given us, savoring, rejoicing, doing kindness and justice? Do we live honestly, fully, compassionately, now? Do you?

Let's pray so. Let's pray so, singing a song of choice, now, and singing in light of the declaration I shared when I started. Let's sing, "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus."