

The Squandering Life

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, September 23, 2007.

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

In today's collect, we ask God to help us not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love heavenly things, so that while we live among things that are passing away, we may be devoted to those things that will endure.

In California, there is a mansion called the Winchester Mystery House. It was built at the turn of the 20th century by Mrs. Sarah Winchester, widow of the Winchester Rifle owner. A medium had told her to build a home for herself and for the spirits that were killed by Winchester guns and were seeking vengeance on her family. The catch was that she could never stop building. Only continuous construction on the house would appease the spirits. As long as she was building, she would live. As soon as construction stopped, she would die. So for 24 hours a day every day for 38 years until her death, carpenters hammered away, ending up with a home of 160 rooms. In the process, it seemed that they lost sight of what a house was supposed to be. There are staircases that lead to ceilings or to nowhere, doors that open into brick walls or empty space, a window built into the floor, and other bizarre features make it clear that this house was designed not so much to live in but rather to put off dying in. It stands today as a reminder of somebody who got the earthly and the heavenly turned around. Because she lost sight of what "living forever" really means, she squandered the last 38 years of her life trying to avoid dying.

We can laugh at Mrs. Winchester's misjudgment, partly because her delusion was so enormous, and partly because the house itself stands as a visible illustration of her misspent life. But we should not be too quick to judge. It's not always so clearcut, knowing what is passing away and what will endure. Jeremiah's lament over his dying Israel shows an entire nation that has gotten lost. They didn't mistake a house for eternal life, but they mistook foreign idols for the one true God. In doing so, they squandered away their collective life, and Jeremiah asks if there is any hope for them: "Is there no balm in Gilead? No physician? Why has the health of my poor people not been restored?"

To squander your life away doesn't need a deliberate act of will. Israel may have deliberately rejected God, but perhaps they were just indifferent, not caring enough to maintain that relationship -- like somebody who won't stop smoking or drinking despite the pleas of loved ones, even when the signs are there, until at the end there is no more balm that can heal, no physician, no more health left to restore. Or we forget what is fleeting and what is eternal, what are the idols and what is the one true God. Almost without knowing how we went astray, we end up dying, like Israel, or we end up getting fired, like the manager in Jesus' parable.

We enter the manager's life as he is caught squandering his employer's property. He's not a bad guy, not an embezzler. He's a spender, not a thief, at least until he's fired. At work, he spends more than he should on office supplies, fun software, text messaging. Or he squanders his time, sitting at the desk reading the Wall Street Journal all morning long. He may squander his own stuff as well. Perhaps he can't go to Linens n' Things without coming out with a bag full of kitchen gadgets. Or he buys extravagant gifts for his family. Or he squanders his time, spending hours staring at the TV. When you don't know what's important, it's easy to fritter your life away. It doesn't take an act of deliberate will, just a slow easy slide.

But getting fired wakes him up. The man thinks, "I'm dead unless I do something about this situation." Getting fired wakes him up to what is important to him -- his standing in the community, or his reputation, or his livelihood. He keeps these things in his sights as he sets about arranging his future, and so he is saved from disaster.

Jesus was also a big spender. But he wasn't a big spender because he didn't know what was important. He knew what was the only important thing, which is God, and he knew that God is a big spender, too. Like God, Jesus squandered love, forgiveness, healing. There was nothing economical about Jesus' life, or even his death for that matter. Some thought that he used it all up, so there was nothing left for himself at the end -- especially when he ended up on the cross crying out "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" But with God, there is no fear of running out of God's love. There is nothing frugal about the love of God. God's love so overflows that it raised Jesus from the dead and raises us up from death also.

If you know what you're living for, and if you are living for heavenly things, then you can afford to be extravagant. You can spend as much as you want, fritter away as much as you want, on love and forgiveness. "If you are faithful in a very little, you will be faithful in much." Jesus' own life made clear that self-giving love, the way of the Cross, is the way to eternal life, because it is the way to God. The self-giving love of Jesus is the "heavenly thing" that will endure, and the example that we are to hold fast to.

How do we live that out as Christians in the Body of Christ, the Church? We are placed among earthly things. But we are called to advocate for the heavenly things, for peace and mercy and reconciliation. Is our church being faithful to its calling as the Body of Christ? Or are we afraid to speak for Christ? Are we frittering away the mission to which God calls us?

The Lambeth Conference of 1930, and every Lambeth conference since then, declared that "war as a method of settling international disputes is incompatible with the teaching and example of Our Lord Jesus Christ." The moral judgment of humanity, it said, needs to be enlisted on the side of peace. In other words, the church must speak out if there is no peace. If we are the church of the Prince of Peace, then our silence about the war in Iraq constitutes a hoarding of our faith when we should be spendthrift in crying out for peace. As Dean Diamond has asked, where is the voice of my church?

There will be an interfaith dawn-to-dusk fast to call for an end to the war in Iraq on October 8. We can begin there, grounding ourselves spiritually in peace. If we are to be faithful to our Christian life, if we are to be a people of reconciliation, it must come out in our lives and

our actions. It will not do to keep silence in the face of war and its destruction of human life. Remember what Martin Luther King, Jr. said about the Church and its relationship to the society in which it operates, that the church is to be the conscience of the state and not its servant. Maybe it is time for the conscience of the state to raise its prophetic but loving voice. Let us be extravagant in our love for the world, extravagant in our love for all God's people – us and the Iraqis, our soldiers and their soldiers – and extravagant in our commitment to Christ's spirit of sacrificial love and peace.