

Eulogy

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The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

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Luke 16:19-31

In your bulletin this morning is a half sheet of paper – if you are watching online, you get to provide your own. You are invited to write a six-word memoir, which is exactly what it sounds like it is. Six words. It can be a sentence. It can be six connected or unrelated words. It can be funny, at least to you, or sad. We've included some examples on page 16 of the bulletin; use them as a guide, or not. We've provided space on that sheet to share a copy with us. You can drop it in the offering plate, or post on our FB age or email to me later. No obligation to do so, of course. Do it now, or take it home and do it later. And whether you share it or not, I'd encourage you to do it as a creative exercise but also, perhaps, a meaningful one.

Earlier this summer, it felt like there was a string of deaths of people who were well-known. I know it doesn't happen that way, but it felt that way, all in the space of a week or two.

- Nichelle Nichols, she of Star Trek fame. I was neither a Trekker nor a Trekkie, but I must confess a little boyhood crush on the woman who played Lt. Uhura, who shared TV's first interracial kiss, and who, perhaps more importantly, encouraged women and people of color to apply to be astronauts.
- Olivia Newton-John, the Australian singer and actor. I must confess a little teenage crush on the woman who played Sandy in "Grease," and who, certainly more importantly, advanced the cause of breast cancer awareness and treatment with exceedingly good grace.
- David McCullough, who I will confess a little historian crush, who made American history – John Adams, Harry S. Truman, the Wright Brothers – come alive for so many of us.
- Naomi Judd, she of family singing fame, whose sad death by suicide highlighted the need for us to pay much greater attention to mental health needs.

- You have heard me mention Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian minister and writer, whose writing inspired countless ministers and preachers with its elegance and insight.
- Tony Dow, Beaver's older brother Wally, who seemed ageless and timeless.

All of those deaths punctuated by the more recent death of the Queen, whose life, regardless of our feeling toward Britain or the monarchy, touched many of us for its longevity and steadfastness.

I wonder, for each of them, what their six-word memoir might have been, stripped away from social media perceptions or the trappings of celebrity. What six words would have described their own self-understanding of who they were and what they did and how they lived.

Why today, of all days, so I ask these things?

It's a tough gospel lesson we encounter this morning. Last week, Jesus told a parable of a rich man and his manager and the confounding ways that the manager stewarded his master's possessions. Despite our perplexity over the story, Jesus' conclusion could not have been clearer – you cannot serve God and wealth. It won't be the last time we hear that. In fact, we hear a version of that same affirmation this morning, moving now, however, from debt management and loan forgiveness to literal life and death matters.

Jesus tells another parable. A rich man – he could afford fancy clothes and expensive meals. He was a wealthy property owner, and at the gate of his (let's call it an) estate was a poor man, a sick man, a man named Lazarus – not the Lazarus we will meet later. His was a sad, sad case. He longed to eat. He longed to be healed. He longed for attention from the rich man; that's why he positioned himself at the gate of his estate. It was not to be.

Both men die. Though understandings of heaven and hell are not fully formed at this point, they are lifted up in this story by Jesus. Lazarus was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man – unnamed – was sent to Hades, to be tormented, in flames. In this scenario, each dead man can see the other. The rich man, in his torment, asks Abraham to allow Lazarus to cool him off a bit. The

answer is no. Can Lazarus go and warn his surviving brothers to change their ways? The answer is no.

I wonder, perhaps irreverently, what the rich man's six-word memoir might be. "Ignored the poor. Now I burn." Or "Enjoyed riches. Now, not so much." Or "Instead of turning, now I'm burning." Or Lazarus'. "Suffered in life. Healed in death."

What seems to be Jesus' point – and especially for the rich man – was that neither's man's six-word memoir was a foregone conclusion. Lazarus sat and suffered at the gate, the implication being that he could be healed, or at least fed. And had the rich man – again, unnamed – just paid a little bit of attention, offered just a modicum of mercy, an ounce of compassion, Lazarus would have been fed, perhaps even healed, taken seriously, anyway, and the rich man's ultimate destination might have differed. After all, Jesus says, he had all the testimony before him – Moses and the prophets – to help him choose differently. It was not as though he didn't know. He made his choice, and at least here, the choice had ultimate consequences.

Chelsey Harmon summarizes for us: "He should have known better; he could have been (and done) better. He received good things, but built up treasures for himself instead of being rich towards God."

Harmon continues: "Not once does the rich man own up to his own mistreatment of Lazarus. Not once does the rich man repent. Not once does the rich man even talk *to* Lazarus. And yet—he knows Lazarus' name, indicating that he knew all along about this poor, suffering man who laid at his gates, hungry and covered in sores...the rich man already knew what he needed to know to be and do better in this life. He chose his god."

As Jesus said, "you cannot serve God and wealth," this time with ultimate consequences.

That is how powerfully effective forces like money and wealth and greed and self-centeredness are at distorting our vision, contaminating our perception of right and wrong, of privilege and stewardship, of responsibility and expectation, and the way we see and treat others.

Harmon concludes: “All of these were acts and decisions on the part of the rich man; they directly stemmed from who/what he loved, and therefore worshipped. Jesus tells this story to make a point of consistency: we can only follow one god/God, we can only give our heart to one true devotion.”

Audrey West writes that “(The rich man) has the knowledge, resources and ability to make a difference to Lazarus. Instead, he prefers an earthly life of excess and indifference, cut off from others, rather than the abundant life offered by God.”

West says: “It need not be that way...”

As I said last week, we may not be, or at least perceive ourselves to be, the wealthy landowner. Nor might we be, or perceive ourselves to be, the rich man this morning, eating and drinking and being merry, while ignoring suffering around us.

Fair enough.

I am interested, at least a bit, in how you and I utilize the financial resources we have been given, even as we are leading up to stewardship season. I am less interested in, in my own life and in yours, about the fears that would drive us to do good, the negative motivations of this parable, the heaven-and-hell incentives. As Abraham in the parable says, we have examples all around us, from scripture – love and justice and mercy and compassion, all that Matthew 25 business – and from those living saints all around us who heard the message and followed.

That is what I am interested in, how we are stewards of the life we have been given, stewards of the moments and relationships and opportunities. Stewards of the gifts. We are not likely well-known singers or actors or historians, let alone royalty. But we are beloved children of God, and given the very same gifts and the very same choices on how we spend our time and how we spend our money.

In one of my favorite Simpsons episodes, Dustin Hoffman guest stars as Mr. Bergstrom, a substitute teacher who understands Lisa better than Homer, her father. As he’s leaving Springfield, Mr. Bergstrom gives his crestfallen student a note reminding her that while she may sometimes feel lonely and unseen, she’s special. It reads, “You are Lisa Simpson.” Replace that reminder with your own name.

In our baptism, we are given a name, and more than a name, an identity, and along with that identity gifts to serve, gifts to love. “Rent” famously asks how you measure a life – 525,600 minutes and all that. Measure in love, we are told. What would it look like to make love our six-word memoir. “Loves God. Loves neighbor. Loves self.” What would it have looked like for that rich man simply to have loved, loved himself more so that his possessions did not possess him, and loved Lazarus, even just a little bit, so that each of their lives would have been transformed?

We are starting a conversation around the book “Braiding Sweetgrass.” The native tradition, Robin Wall Kimmerer tells us, talks about “Original Instructions,” a compass, an orientation, about following life’s path. We all carry the slimmest of instructions, she writes: “use your gifts and dreams for good.” Use your gifts and dreams for good. Seven words, but it will work.

Frederick Buechner wrote “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”

What happens when we listen to our lives, and overlay that listening with the values that are important to us, important to our faith? Buechner also famously wrote that “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.” I love that, even though I know it’s not always so simple or straightforward as that, that often deep gladness and deep hunger do not meet. But I do know that deep gladness can’t be found in things, and that deep hunger can be found everywhere.

These are big matters, and big questions, and just because Jesus lays them out for us with crystal clarity, as he does, that doesn’t mean the road is easy or the pathway clear. Still, we know, deep in our hearts, deep in our gut, deep in our soul, do we not? We know.

In her profound and poignant poem “The Summer Day,” Mary Oliver lays it out for us as well, with clarity and eloquence, the clarity and eloquence of a brilliant poet:

“Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean--
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down--
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?”

What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? How will you love?
How will you serve? How will you give? How will you live, day by day, into the
promise of your baptism? You will be transformed as you do so, and through it all,
you will be a transforming presence in the lives of others, those you know, those
you don't, every one of them – like you, like Lazarus – a beloved child of God.
Amen.