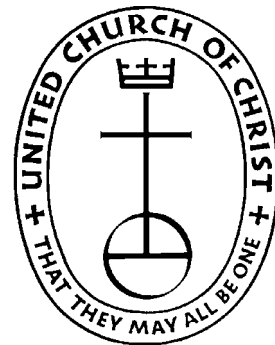


Get a Life – a Real Life

A Sermon By —
JERALD M. STINSON
March 28, 2010



This sermon uses the stories of biblical figures and the work of a contemporary novelist to urge us to get a life, a real life – a life that's more than work, a life lived in community with others, a life that reaches out and builds a better world, a life that values each present moment.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson
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Reading: Genesis 12:1-2,4-5; 31:17 & Mark 11:7-10

First Congregational Church
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Get a Life – a Real Life

The Hebrew Bible begins with some mythology about the origins and meaning of life. Then it shifts to legendary accounts of the beginning of Hebrew history, starting with these words:

Our God said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and the home of your parents and go to a place I will show you. I will make you a great people. I will bless you and make your name so great that it will be used in blessings.

Abram, who was 75 years old when he left Haran, began the journey as Our God had instructed and his nephew Lot went with them. Abram took Sarai his spouse, Lot, all their possessions and all the dependents they acquired in Haran, and set out for Canaan.

Abram and Sarai would later be called Abraham and Sarah. Think about that decision they made in the later years of their lives – to leave behind all that was familiar as they headed into an unknown future in a distant land. They did this in response to what Abraham felt was a calling by God. They did it in pursuit of more meaning in life.

Our second text is about Abraham and Sarah's grandson, Jacob. As a youth, Jacob's acts of deception infuriated his twin brother Esau. Fearing Esau might kill him, Jacob fled from Canaan to Haran where he became part of the family of Laban, marrying Laban's daughters Leah and Rachel and ultimately doing well. Settled and prosperous, he still yearned for more meaning in life. He needed reconciliation with his brother. Thus, our text:

So Jacob then loaded his spouses and their children on camels, and with all the livestock and all the goods he had accumulated, he set off for the land of Canaan, where Isaac, his father, had dwelt.

Another courageous decision – Jacob, Leah and Rachel all journeyed to what might be a disastrous reunion, doing so in quest for richer, more meaningful lives.

Let me provide some background for today's third text – the expected Palm Sunday reading. Jesus, the Galilean peasant sage, began a Jewish reform movement among his fellow peasants in the Galilee. It focused on two things.

First Jesus affirmed those turned into outcasts by a rigid religious purity code. A

faithful practicing Jew, Jesus challenged the legalism that had crept into his faith tradition after the exile in Babylon.

Second, he challenged the ideology underlying Rome's brutal occupation of Israel. The heart of his teaching focused on the difference between the Βασιλεία του Θεού, the Empire of God, and the Βασιλεία of Rome. Rome – ruling with an iron fist over a cluster of colonies like ancient Israel. Rome – choking the life out of landless peasants like Jesus and those who gathered around him. Rome – taxing its subject people into submission.

In preaching, story-telling and interaction with others, Jesus made it clear that for him:

- The Empire of Rome was about violence, while the Empire of God was about peace.
- Rome's empire treated people like objects to be used to increase the power and affluence of a few, while in God's empire, everyone was precious, sacred, and held in the embrace of unconditional love.
- Rome's empire separated people into classes and castes; God's empire was one of radical equality.
- Rome's empire excluded people; God's empire was about extravagant hospitality.
- Rome's empire was built on greed; God's empire on sharing.
- Rome's empire affirmed vengeance and punishment; God's empire was about forgiveness and mercy.
- Rome's empire left the poor despairing; God's empire offered hope for all.

So Jesus, the human prophet and teacher, went from village to village in the Galilee sharing that radical message. Through his charismatic personality, through the power of his rhetoric, through the genuine love radiating from the depth of his soul – he gathered a following of peasants.

He could do that in the remote Galilee – but Jerusalem? Jerusalem, the holy city, was the center of Roman power. The colonial governor ruled from there. The frightening Roman legions were headquartered there. And Rome's imperial policies even infiltrated Jerusalem's Jewish temple. Its Chief Priest was appointed by Rome

Passover, the great Jewish festival, worried the Romans. Pilgrims flocked to Jerusalem; the city streets teeming with people. There was always the possibility of resistance to the occupation.

So it took incredible courage for Jesus to journey to Jerusalem, to enter the holy city during Passover. Here's our third text today:

They brought a colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks across its back, and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread leafy branches which they had cut from the fields. Everyone around Jesus cried out: "Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of Our God! Blessed is the coming reign of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest."

Forsaking the safety of the Galilee, Jesus entered Jerusalem, doing so with what must have been some sort of demonstration or street theater calling attention to his presence. And he had undoubtedly already decided to commit the civil disobedience in the Temple later in the week – turning over the tables of the money changers and dove sellers – that would bring upon him the anger of the religious establishment and the rage of the Romans who would kill him before week's end.

Why Jerusalem? Was it because for his life to have meaning or for him to be faithful to God's calling, he needed to move in a new direction; to reach the crowds in the holy city itself.

So from these three biblical images, let me turn now to something from our own time. Hopefully it will all come together in the end.

Anna Quindlen is a powerful writer – a novelist, a Pulitzer prize winning journalist and opinion columnist.

In 1999, she delivered the Commencement Address at Villanova University. I think her powerful words called for decisions like those made by Abraham and Sarah, by Jacob, Leah and Rachel, and by Jesus – decisions to move in new directions as they sought meaningful lives.

Quindlen began her address by indicating that two of her uncles had also received honorary doctorates from Villanova – one a gifted physician; the other a leader in the world of commerce. She said both of them could have said something important about their professions but that she had no specialized expertise. She said, "I'm a novelist. My work is human nature. Real life is all I know."

Revealing that knowledge of real life, she told the graduates: "You walk out of

here this afternoon with only one thing that no one else has. There will be hundreds of people with your same degree; there will be thousands doing what you want to do for a living. But you will be the only person alive who has sole custody of your life. Your particular life. Your entire life. Not just your life at a desk, or on a bus, or in a car, or at the computer. Not just the life of your mind, but the life of your heart. Not just your bank account, but your soul."

She warned those graduates, soon to be entering the work force, not to confuse their work with their real life. She told them that when Senator Paul Tsongas declined to run for reelection because he'd been diagnosed with cancer, a friend wrote him saying, "No one ever said on his or her deathbed I wish I had spent more time in the office."

Quindlen said: "People don't talk about the soul very much anymore. It is easier to write a resume than craft a spirit. But a resume is a cold comfort on a winter night, or when you're sad, broke, lonely, or when you've gotten back test results and they're not good."

"Here is my resume," she said. "I am a good mother to three children. I have tried never to let my profession stand in the way of being a good parent. I no longer consider myself the center of the universe. I show up. I listen. I try to laugh.

"I am a good friend to my husband. I have tried to make marriage vows mean what they say. I show up. I listen. I try to laugh.

"I am a good friend to my friends, and they to me. Without them, there would be nothing to say to you today, because I would be a cardboard cutout. But I call them on the phone, and I meet them for lunch. I show up. I listen. I try to laugh.

"I would be rotten, or at best mediocre at my job, if those other things were not true. You cannot be really first rate at your work if your work is all you are."

Then she moved to the heart of her address: "So here's what I wanted to tell you today: get a life. A real life, not a manic pursuit of the next promotion, a bigger paycheck, a larger house. Do you think you'd care so very much about those things if you blew an aneurysm one afternoon, or found a lump in your breast? Get a life in which you notice the smell of salt water pushing itself on a breeze, a life in which you stop and watch how a red tailed hawk circles over the water gap or the way a baby scowls with concentration when she tries to pick up a cheerio with her thumb and first finger."

Quindlen told those graduates that their lives should be lived in company with others. She said, "Get a life in which you are not alone. Find people you love, and who

love you. Each time you look at your diploma, remember that you are still a student, still learning how to best treasure your connection to others. Pick up the phone. Send an e-mail. Write a letter. Kiss your Mom. Hug your Dad.”

So a meaningful life stretches beyond the workplace, is rooted in community and then for Quindlen it also seeks to spread around the goodness of life. There’s what in Hebrew is called, “Tikkun Olam,” – mending the world, making it a better place. Feeding the homeless, caring for children in poverty, welcoming immigrants.

Quindlen said, “Get a life in which you are generous. Look around at the azaleas in the neighborhood where you grew up; look at a full moon hanging silver in a sky on a cold night. And realize that life is the best thing ever, and that you have no business taking it for granted.

“Care so deeply about its goodness that you want to spread it around. Take money you would have spent on beer and give it to charity. Work in a soup kitchen. Be a big brother or sister. All of you want to do well. But if you do not do good, too, then doing well will never be enough.”

Listen to those words again: “All of you want to do well. But if you do not do good too, then doing well will never be enough.”

She said, “It is so easy to waste our lives: our days, our hours, our minutes. It is so easy to take for granted the color of the azaleas, the sheen of limestone on Fifth Avenue, the color of our kids eyes, the way the melody in a symphony rises and falls and disappears and rises again. It is easy to exist instead of live.”

Quindlen’s speech also affirmed life’s journey itself. She said, “I learned to live many years ago. Something really, really bad happened to me, something that changed my life.” (I suspect she was talking about her mother’s death from cancer when Quindlen was a teenager.)

She said, “What I learned from it is what seems to be the hardest lesson of all. I learned to love the journey, not the destination.” Think about Abraham and Sarah journeying to Canaan, Jacob, Rachel and Leah journeying back from Haran, Jesus journeying from the Galilee to Jerusalem.

Quindlen said, “I learned to love the journey, not the destination. I learned that it is not a dress rehearsal, and that today is the only guarantee you get. I learned to look at all the good in the world and to try to give some of it back because I believed in it completely and utterly. And I tried to do that, in part, by telling others what I had learned. By telling them this: Consider the lilies of the field. Look at the fuzz on a baby’s ear.

Read in the backyard with the sun on your face. Learn to be happy. And think of life as a terminal illness because if you do you will live it with joy and passion as it ought to be lived.”

Then her final message: live in the present moment. I found a passage from one of her writings about her children (I don’t know the details of its context). She wrote: “I did not live in the moment enough. This is particularly clear now that the moment is gone, captured only in photographs. There is one picture of the three children sitting in the grass on a quilt in the shadow of the swing set on a summer day, ages 6, 4 and 1. I wish I could remember what we ate, what we talked about, how they sounded and how they looked when they slept that night. I wish I had not been in a hurry to get on to the next things: dinner, bath, book, bed. I wish I had treasured the doing a little more and the getting it done a little less.”

Get a life a real life – a life that’s more than work, a life lived in community with others, a life that reaches out and builds a better world, a life that values each present moment.

Let me end with the story Anna Quindlen used to end that commencement speech:

“I found one of my best teachers on the boardwalk at Coney Island. It was December, and I was doing a story about how the homeless survive in the winter. He and I sat on the wooden supports, dangling our feet over the side, and he told me about pan-handling the boulevard when the summer crowds were gone, sleeping in a church when the temperature went below freezing, hiding from the police amidst the Tilt-a-Whirl and other rides. But he told me that most of the time he stayed on the boardwalk, facing the water, just the way we were sitting now, even when it got cold and he had to wear his newspapers after he read them. I asked him why. Why didn’t he go to one of the shelters? Why didn’t he check himself into the hospital for detox? And he just stared out at the ocean and said, ‘Look at the view, young lady. Look at the view.’

Quindlen said: “And every day, in some little way, I try to do what he said. I try to look at the view. And that’s the last thing I have to tell you today, words of wisdom from a man with not a dime in his pocket, no place to go, nowhere to be. Look at the view. You’ll never be disappointed.”