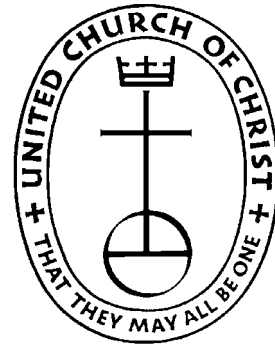


Unfinished Business

A Sermon By —
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December 28, 2008



There is unfinished business in all aspects of our lives: our understanding is necessarily incomplete, our relationships are changing and fragile, complicated ethical questions aren't easily answered, and our work against violence and injustice is never done. However the important thing is not that we finish, but that we keep moving forward.

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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UNFINISHED BUSINESS

We are on the verge of a new year – a new year in the midst of a recession and global economic crisis. Next Sunday I want to look at some of the fear and anxiety we face as we struggle to cope with change.

But today, I want to look backward rather than forward – backward at all those unfinished tasks with which I live and with which I imagine most of you live as well.

At home, on my nightstand there is a novel last opened some three or four weeks ago; I'm probably 30 pages into it. Next to it, two magazines, mostly unread.

At the foot of my bed is a stack of magazines and journals to read while exercising at the gym; I do that, but the stack somehow still continues to grow.

In the living room, there is a stack of CD's not yet returned to the proper location; there are several books of poetry by Emily Dickinson; I was going to get into that – two years ago.

And in my office, I have about four feet of unread magazines and journals. In addition, I have probably 100 books on the floor; I've opened and read parts of almost all of them – they seem likely resources for sermons or classes, but they all remain unfinished. Some have been there for years.

And I suspect many of you face the same thing – closets, bookshelves, computer desktops, cupboards – with unfinished tasks.

Schubert's VIII Symphony is as well-known for its title, "The Unfinished Symphony," as it is for its beautiful music. There is even a website, www.unfinished.com.

Now stacks of unfinished projects can be disheartening. As another year comes to a close, it is frustrating to see old piles still there, perhaps getting bigger and bigger.

And this is not a new problem. The Biblical narratives are filled with stories of people coping with unfinished business.

The Gospel of John, the last canonical gospel to be written, was not a history of Jesus as much as a theological understanding of the meaning of his life. It was an at-

tempt to give a “complete” picture of Jesus. But listen to the author’s candid admission at the gospel’s end: “Now there are many other things that Jesus did – so many in fact, that the whole world could not hold all the books that could be written.” An acknowledgment of an unfinished task, it was as if the writer was saying, “I’ve tried, but the task remains incomplete.”

The most famous part of the Book of Hebrews is the eleventh chapter’s description of heroes of faith like Abraham, Sarah, Rahab and Moses. But listen to the writer: “And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets.” The task incomplete.

Moses led the Hebrew slaves to freedom and saw the promised land, but he didn’t live to finish the task; Joshua led the people into that land.

Elijah died before he could complete what he felt was God’s final assignment; Elisha had to finish it.

So there are many biblical stories about unfinished business.

Now on the final Sunday of this year, I want to reflect on four areas where unfinished business plays a significant role in our lives.

First, the realm of understanding. All of us struggle to find meaning in our diverse experiences. Just by attending a church, we are acknowledging a certain interest in looking at ultimate questions.

Sometimes our questions are merely intellectual exercises: “wouldn’t it be interesting to know this or that?” But many questions are deeper and more difficult for us, the answers more important in relation to how we live our lives. Is there a God? What gives meaning to our lives? Why do some good and kind people die ugly deaths at an early age while some mean or arrogant folks live long, seemingly pain-free lives? Is there something beyond death?

Those questions essentially shape our view of life. And though we yearn for certainty, this whole realm of understanding is often murky with lots of unanswered queries and unresolved debates.

Theologian Paul Tillich once remarked that every time he found a satisfactory answer to a question, it simply raised two or three even more difficult questions.

St. Augustine, so the story goes, once observed a child on the seashore pouring pails of water into a hole in the sand. The child said he was emptying the ocean into this

hole. Augustine reflected that this was no more fanciful than his own attempt to write a book on the nature of God.

No matter how hard we try, there are limits on what we can know and understand.

We also recognize that our thinking changes over time as we learn more. Knowledge is not fixed and static. Howard Thurman once wrote about the loss of innocence when the mythic Adam and Eve sought fruit from the tree of knowledge. He said, "There is something comforting and reassuring about innocence. To dwell in innocence is to inhabit a region where storms do not come and where all breezes are gentle. But when knowledge comes," he said, "the whole world is turned upside down. Struggle emerges as a way of life. And appetite is awakened that can never be satisfied. The process of moving from innocence to knowledge is never finished."

The internet is a source of abundant information, but it is also a source of frustration. When looking up a particular topic, we might encounter a search response that indicates thousands of articles to check. That can't be done; some of that must be left unfinished.

So while confessing our desire for completeness, the best we can do is acknowledge our limits in the realm of understanding. With open minds, we must continue to struggle with important questions, admitting that there is mystery and much we will never know. In the realm of understanding there is always unfinished business.

The second realm involves relationships. We are creatures that need to live in supportive networks of families, partners, children and friends. And often there is unfinished business in this realm too.

And perhaps the greatest danger in relationships is forgetting the unfinished business, assuming a false sense of permanence.

A couple will begin a lifetime of living together totally enraptured with one another, absolutely sure their joy, passion and deep love will always be strong. But as they grow and change over the years, they may not even see the dangers ahead for their relationship. We must constantly remember that there is always unfinished business to which we must attend in our relationships.

It is the same with parenting. A good parent treats a 10-year-old child differently than when that child was 5 years old; a good parent relates in a totally different way to a college-age child than to an adolescent struggling with the pressures of high school. And sometimes the role changes are dramatic. At Wayne Kalayjian's memorial service

this week, his daughter Pat told of the different ways she related to her father when she was a child growing up, when she had her own family, and when she began to care for him in his final years.

Unfinished business is part of all relationships and that means there is a fragile nature to all relationships. The rapid passing of time and the uncertainty of each new day call us to avoid postponing the unfinished business with those for whom we care deeply.

My stack of unread books is far less important than the unfinished business of relationships. At any time, we can lose the people we love.

Over the 36 years of my ministry, I can't tell you how many times I have heard the phrase, "If only I had..." And I hear it most often when it comes too late. I hear it after a partner or friend has died, after a relationship has become so bad it can't be salvaged, after deep disillusionment between a parent and a child. The unfinished business of our relationships calls for our immediate attention.

The third realm – ethical decision-making. Life is complicated today; we have to make really difficult moral decisions. There are obvious ethical issues like abortion and sexual decision-making. But there are also many other ethical issues in our daily lives. Can I continue to work at a company making harmful products? What does it mean to be honest and filled with integrity in today's business world? How do I become a responsible steward of creation while living in a society that disregards the future of the earth? Or there are all the questions of medical ethics – whether or not to prolong life, how to bring new children into the world, issues of cloning and stem cell research.

Now some churches hand you a list of definite answers to those questions. But we don't. We recognize that complicated ethical questions always create unfinished business. There will always be new insights for our consideration. We will always have to struggle with those issues.

And the final realm with unfinished business is that of outreach, advocacy and service. We know God's way is one of shalom, not war, so we are involved in efforts to secure global peace. We know God's way calls for the sharing of the earth's bounty, not for the immoral gap between the riches of the rich and the poverty of today's poor. We know that God's way is one of justice and equality, not of discrimination and oppression.

In our advocacy and activism, there is often frustrating unfinished business. It seems as soon as one war ends, another breaks out – calling for new action on our part.

As soon as one group seems liberated from the shackles of discrimination, another group is pushed to the front. There is always more to be done for the homeless, for peace, for the protection of human rights. And all we can do is keep trying to make a dent in that unfinished business, keep resisting giving up and doing nothing.

As a parent, I always wanted my children to finish their projects. And I naively often think I will finish mine. But if I am honest with myself, I know that won't happen.

I have an image of orderly, tidy world, and our world just doesn't function that way. One of the sentences the early church writers put on Jesus' lips as he was dying was "It is finished." And so it may have seemed. But it was far from finished; his friends and followers kept his message alive; it continued beyond his death.

Like those early followers of Jesus, in the face of the unfinished business in our lives, all we can do is what they did – to work as hard as we can, to do the best we can, and to trust in God's love.

Historian Samuel Eliot Morrison wrote, "I find the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand as in what direction we are moving." And I think that is the philosophy with which we can move into a new year.

In a world of unfinished business, we can move forward as pilgrims on a life-long journey, a journey we make side-by-side with others. We are pilgrims open to change, willing to struggle with new, challenging ideas, pilgrims committed to action even in the face of frustration. As we enter 2009, we won't finish all the business left behind in 2008, but walking together as pilgrims on a journey, maybe we can continue to take care of that business which is most important. Amen.