

“If We Live, If We Die” / Romans 14:7-12 / 14 September 2014

“We do not live to ourselves,” The Apostle Paul assures the church at Rome. “And we don't die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.” Did ever words of comfort have such an ominous ring? I mean, what do you live for? What will you die for? Are those the questions Paul is asking? “Ah, preposition trouble,” as Daffy Duck once famously said! The question is not what we live and die “for.” The question is what (or whom) we live and die “to.” What do you live to? What will you die to? If your life is a song, or a painting, or a sculpture, to whom are you fashioning it? Whose eye or ear are you trying to delight? Your own? That of an inattentive world? To whom do you live?

There have been so many funerals here at Bower Hill lately, so many genuine and heartfelt eulogies, spoken over the ashes of our own beloved people, that it's easy to dwell on these “ultimate questions.” On the first day of class at Pittsburgh Seminary this past week, a much-loved professor dropped dead of a heart attack. Like most things that happen in the world today, I heard about it first on FaceBook. His name was “Jannie Swart,” and the one time I met him, several months ago, he learned that I had spent five years in Cameroon, and he wanted to talk about “The Indomitable Lions,” which is Cameroon's national soccer team. Aside from the fact that I nearly perished in the Cameroonian soccer riots of 1998, my information about the team was all fifteen years outdated. He knew more about them than I did. Jannie was an Afrikaner, a white South African of Dutch ancestry, and he came to Pittsburgh by way of my hometown of Oil City, where he pastored Second Presbyterian Church. Back in South Africa, he had taken part in the struggle to end apartheid. On the first day of class, Jannie had been playing “ultimate frisbee” with the students on the front lawn, when he simply fell to the ground. By the time he arrived at the hospital, it was already too late.

He'd only been at PTS for one year, but he quickly became a central figure. Another member of the faculty said of Jannie, “He was both the mind and the conscience of this school.” Others said that he was a bridge-builder, the one and only person who was loved and respected by both conservatives and liberals—if indeed there are any at PTS. As an aside, my wife and I met in the class that Jannie was teaching, though there was a different professor back in those days. I might even say that we fell in love while bonding over our frustrations with said professor. And yet, while the many sing their praises of Jannie Swart, a man I barely knew, the one piece of his story that reaches out and grabs me is the fact that he died *playing frisbee on the seminary lawn with students!* PTS is my alma mater, and I had some wonderful professors, dignified doctors of the church in hoods and gowns. I'm not sure I could have told you that it had a front lawn, much less that a professor would ever play sports there with the students. To what does a person live? It often becomes clear in the end.

Another religious leader from another ethnically divided country died just this past week. This one was the once-famous Ian Paisley, that firebrand fundamentalist Presbyterian minister and politician from Northern Ireland. Somehow, Paisley's death didn't make it onto FaceBook. But back in the 80s and 90s, he was still raising holy hell, fanning the flames of enmity between Catholics and Protestants in that troubled land. He founded “The Free Presbyterian Church,” a sect that adheres to strict biblical literalism which has since begun evangelizing here in the States. In an audience with Pope John Paul II, Paisley in 1988, stood up and shouted, “I denounce you as the Anti-Christ!” The Pope smiled and nodded as the Swiss guard ushered Paisley out of the room. He despised Catholicism and perhaps he even hated Catholics. He cried out against homosexuals, and civil rights activists, and all those ecumenical Protestants who, to his mind, made cheap compromises with the evil powers of Rome. He especially hated what he called “the Romeward trend” in Presbyterian churches in Ireland. A fellow politician once said to him, “Ian, if the word 'no' were to go out of the English language, you'd be speechless, wouldn't you?” Paisley responded, “No, I wouldn't!”

Now, truly, I don't mean to speak judgment over a man I didn't even know, a man who lived as best he could according to the principles that seemed good to him. But we are running up against preposition troubles again at this point. Is it possible to live one's life “to” something good, all the

while dedicating all one's energies “against” all the many things one hates—in Paisley's case, Catholics, gays, and accommodationists? People sense, and they know in the end, whether we're living our lives like a gift “to” something or someone of great worth, or if we're living “for” lesser things, or even “against” all the things we despise. “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord. And if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.”

Every three years without fail, this reading from the Apostle Paul appears in our lectionary cycle, just like an unwanted doctor's appointment. I like the poetry of it, but I'll admit to you that every third year, I struggle again with its meaning. This language of “living to” someone or something, this is distinctly Paul. It's his unique idiolect. You'll never catch Mark or Isaiah talking like this. And though it's my triennial dilemma, Paul's words are so powerful that, to me, this reading eclipses the other passages I could choose to preach from. There is something very significant here for us modern folks, who rush from meetings to errands to the kids' sporting events. There's something here especially for us folks who can't help but glance up from our grindstones every now and again to ask the heavens if we're investing our lives meaningfully, if we're living in ways that really matter, if in the end the world will have been better for our part in it. In this reading from Romans, you can almost hear that strange old Apostle, bald-headed and bearded, standing outside the anxieties and cares that you and I know, whispering down the centuries of time: You with your commitments! You with your memberships! You with your plans, and your bills, and your unspoken dreams! You with your favorite charities, your political affiliations, your beliefs! You with your secrets, your memories of days past and hopes for tomorrow! *To whom* are you living? Paul does not ask “for whom,” nor “against whom,” nor even “with whom.” Paul asks “to whom” are you living? A thing of beauty—a book, a building, a song—is always dedicated by its maker “to” someone. You give a gift “to” someone. This simple preposition, “to,” puts all our living into perspective. You live your life not for things, not even for good causes, nor for people, but “to” someone. To whom do you live yours?

Of course, we're always living “for” things that matter and sometimes for things that don't. About a month ago, maybe a little more, I began receiving emails from a prominent Jewish agency here in our city. The emails were from an assistant of some sort, and they informed me—in cordial but terse language—that his supervisor wished to speak with me. I was perplexed and a little intimidated. I had never even heard of this Jewish organization, but an Internet search showed me they were quite large and well-respected. I felt like I was being called into the principle's office of a school that I never attended. I had a hunch that it had something to do with the decision, in June, by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church to stop investing in three companies that benefit financially from Israel's ongoing colonization of Palestinian lands. It's a decision that has alienated many of our Jewish friends. And yet, I found it hard to believe that anyone was crying out to his assistant: “Find out what Snyder in Mount Lebanon has to say about all this!” The assistant and I bandied emails back and forth with uncomfortable formality, calling each other “Mister” and “Reverend.” When at last it was time for the scheduled telephone conversation to take place, I was a little nervous. I had prepared a few remarks about how the Presbyterian Church USA in general and Bower Hill Church in particular have an excellent and longstanding record of interfaith cooperation with Judaism. As evidence, I was prepared to point out that we are the only denomination I am aware of that has an official policy never to proselytize Jews. I was prepared to say that we stand with Israel when Israel stands for its own best vision of social justice—which is laid out in the Torah and in the Hebrew prophets and which is Israel's gift to the world. I expected the man to be as formal and imperious as his assistant, perhaps even angry. Well, the supervisor called and said, “Hey, Pastor Snyder, sorry it took me so long to return your call. What can I do for you?” I had never called him. Turns out he was responding to a request by one of our members to speak to our adult class.

Ah, we waste so much energy living for things that don't matter, things that don't end up happening, things we create in our own minds. I spent several days living for possibilities that existed

only in my imagination, preparing for a tense conversation that would never take place. In a way, I was living for a silly vision that bordered on an ego trip. Life is constant anxiety when you live “for” things—be it influence, or recognition, or admiration, or whatever else. But perhaps you already know that. You're never really happy if you live for things...but maybe you know exactly what I mean. Truly, if I did live for the spotlight; if I did live for prestige, to be the guy they called when they were mad at the church, if I did live for power, for impressive numbers in weekly attendance, for renown and for all those charming things that amount to so little; if I lived for those things, mine would be a sad life—for more reasons than one. But if instead I see my living as a song that I sing to the people who care about me, or letter that I write to the people who trust me, to my congregation, or a gift that I give to the God and the world I serve, then all I have to do is my best, and all of it is joy, a privilege and a joy—no anxiety about it!

To whom do you live? I think the short answer to that question is usually, “I live to me. I'm responsible for me. It's my body. It's my mind. It's my property, and I'll do what I want with it. They're my children. It's my right.” I'm reminded of the old Billy Joel song that was popular when I was eight years old. “I don't care what you say anymore, this is my life. Go ahead with your own life. Leave me alone.” The song had a nice sound to it, defiant and strong, but even a child can sense just a touch of narcissism in the words. Is it really “your life”? Don't we all of us belong to somebody? Aren't we all of us connected to others—people we didn't always choose—by bonds deeper and stronger than we know: family, friendship, faith, common experience, shared loss? And do you truly believe that you have no responsibility to care for yourself on behalf of those who love you—both living and dead? You belong to anyone who ever believed in you, or supported you, or taught you. We are stewards of ourselves, not entirely free to act just however we wish. We belong to the One who made us and to the world for which we were created. It's our responsibility to live wisely and well, making our abilities and talents available to the world that God intends to bless through us. “We do *not* live to ourselves, and we do *not* die to ourselves. Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.”

Just in parentheses: people of faith often find themselves in gray areas where they ask the question, “What should I do?” The next time you find yourself on the horns of a moral dilemma, uncertain which course of action to take, you might find clarity by changing the question. Instead of asking, “What should I do?” try asking, “To whom do I belong?” If you can just identify the one—or ones—to whom you belong, then knowing what to do could be quite easy.

Ah, but that's the problem, isn't it? It takes so long, so long to learn that most basic lesson that we are not our own. And all that we would call ours is on loan to us from our Maker. Well, I've used the word “whom” more times in this sermon than I've used it in all forty-four years of my life up to this day. But the sermon is almost over, and the question still lingers: To whom do you live? An easier way to find the answer to that difficult query might be to divide it into two simpler questions: “To whom do you belong, and are you living your life as a gift to that one—or to those ones?” Think for a moment: To whom do you belong? To your spouse, to the long-dead grandparent who loved you so dearly, to those who took risks for you and invested in your future? To whom do you belong? To those little eyes that look to you so trustingly, expecting you to care for them and bring them safely into tomorrow? And the followup question: Are you living as if to that person, and as if to the God who placed you in that person's life? Don't live “for” them. Living for other people sounds all noble and selfless, but it's a recipe for disaster. Living for other people is as thankless a task as living for things. No, don't live “for” them. But let your living be a love song to them, your lullaby, your gift. Live “to” them. Or are you trying to live to yourself? People will know. They will know in the end.

You are not your own. Your life is not a weekly calendar of obligations and demands. It's not a list of accomplishments to be weighed against failures. Your life is a gift that you must give away; to whom will you give it? Your life is a song that you cannot sing for yourself; to whom do you sing it? Your life is a book, an aria that you—with God's help—are composing, performing. To whom?