

## Sermon for April 29: What IS Living?

Acts 9: 36-43

Revelation 7: 9-17

John 21: 20-25

Back in 1972, Memorex launched a very famous advertising series, featuring jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald. She would hit a note, and break a crystal glass, while a tape recorder with a Memorex tape was recording. Then the tape would be played back, the glass would shatter again, and the question would arise: Was it live, or was it Memorex?

What does it mean to be alive? From a biological point of view, life includes the capacity for metabolism, growth, reaction to stimuli, and reproduction. Typing in a Google search of what+is+life yields 1.15 billion hits, with topics ranging from physiology to discovering whether or not there are aliens among us to looking for life in outer space to what is life insurance.

What IS living? For some, it's graduating from eighth grade, or high school, or college, or graduate school. For some, it's finding work after being out of work. For others, the answer is "retirement!" For others, it is time with family and friends.

Spiritually, we are living when we are fulfilling our purpose. What were we made for? And are we doing it? According to question 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism, **Question 1.** *What is thy only comfort in life and death? Answer: That I with body and soul, both in life and death, (a) am not my own, (b) but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; (c) who, with His precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, (d) and delivered me from all the power of the devil; (e) and so preserves me (f) that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; (g) yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, (h) and therefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, (i) and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him. (j)* The Westminster Catechism cuts a little faster to the chase: **Q. 1. What is the chief end of man? A. Man's chief end is to glorify God,<sup>[1]</sup> and to enjoy Him forever.<sup>[2]</sup>** When we are really living, that's what we're doing – glorifying God and enjoying God forever.

The first reading today, from the book of Acts, seems to focus on biology. Tabitha is dead, and is brought back to life. But when we stop and think, it becomes clear that God is being glorified here. Tabitha, or Dorcas, is a disciple of the Lord's, devoted to god works and acts of charity, when she died, while Peter happens to be staying in nearby Lydda. Hers was no longer a vital, functioning body, but a dead one, to paraphrase a dictionary definition of what life is. The distraught followers of the Way ask for Peter to come, and he does; Lydda and Joppa are only about 10-12 miles apart. And there, after praying, Peter summons her back to life. God is glorified, both in her restoration to the body of believers, and in her ability to return to service here on earth.

The second reading, from the Revelation of John, gives us a clear picture of what happens when God is glorified in our lives; it describes the fate of those who have come out of the great ordeal, and who are now present with the Lord at all times. They were martyred because of their proclamation that Jesus is Lord, and now live forever in the presence of the Living God. From our perspective, we may wonder where God was when all of this bloodshed was occurring, but the early Christians considered it an honor to be tortured and even murdered for the Lord. There is a story from the city of Carthage, preserved from 202, about a group of people who were martyred; Perpetua and Felicity are the most prominently mentioned. The story, which may have been written by Tertullian, a Christian historian and theologian of the

early third century from Carthage, makes it clear that they believed that God was glorified in their steadfast commitment to not bow to other gods. They kept their eyes on serving God and testifying to the Lord Jesus. They are examples of non-violent resistance, committed to following Jesus for all of their lives, no matter the cost.

What did Jesus have to say about this? He clearly told Peter, “Follow Me.” That is what we are to do – to follow Him. But Peter took his eyes off Jesus, and instead looked around at the beloved disciple and asked a question: “What about him, Lord?” Jesus bluntly redirects Peter – what is that to you? Stop worrying about the other guy; stay focused on what you are supposed to do, and follow Me.

Too often we get distracted by the world around us; we watch the other guys and gals around us. We get distracted by things we want to hear, even when we should be suspicious of the source, and especially when we are getting distracted from God. But the things we hear seem to promise to make our lives easier, so we focus on them, and can be misled.

An old Italian man lived alone in the country. He wanted to dig his tomato garden but it was very hard work as the ground was hard. His only son, Vincent, who used to help him, was in prison. The old man wrote a letter to his son and described his predicament:

Dear Vincent,

I am feeling pretty badly because it looks like I won't be able to plant my tomato garden this year. I'm just getting too old to be digging up a garden plot. I know if you were here my troubles would be over. I know you would be happy to dig the plot for me.

Love, Dad

A few days later he received a letter from his son:

Dear Dad,

Don't dig up that garden. That's where I buried the bodies.

Love, Vinnie

At 4 a.m. the next morning, FBI agents and local police arrived and dug up the entire area without finding any bodies. They apologized to the old man and left.

That same day the old man received another letter from his son:

Dear Dad,

Go ahead and plant the tomatoes now. That's the best I could do under the circumstances.

Love you, Vinnie

The FBI agents and the local police were distracted by things that they wanted to hear. They didn't stop to consider the hard ground of the plot. They didn't stop to consider that Vinnie would probably figure that his mail would be read. They overruled their own common sense, and ended up helping the guy they were keeping locked up. Sometimes we do the same thing –

but many times our shortcut behavior doesn't benefit anyone at all. Vinnie's father at least got his tomato garden dug up. When we try shortcuts and lose our focus, we aren't fulfilling our purpose. And when we don't keep our focus, we are not living to the extent that we could.

It isn't easy to keep focused on following Jesus. The culture doesn't support it. Our own human inclinations don't really support it. We would rather focus on other peoples' behavior than on our own. But we aren't called to worry about what God has called others to do; we are called to follow Jesus. Pagans in Carthage actually converted to Christianity because they saw Perpetua and Felicity's focus on following Jesus. Perpetua and Felicity and the other martyrs weren't concerned about the behavior of the others around them; they kept their eyes on Jesus and followed Him, and in doing so, glorified God. We don't have to be physically martyred to follow Jesus and glorify God. When we give up our natural inclination to focus more on the "other guy" than on ourselves, when we keep our eyes focused on Jesus, when we do what we are supposed to do and don't do the things we aren't supposed to do, then we too do two things: we fully live, and we glorify God. And that IS life!

So may we live, in joy and celebration, following Jesus all the days of our lives, until He returns in glory. And even so, come soon, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Acts 9: 36-43

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, 'Please come to us without delay.' So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, 'Tabitha, get up.' Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

Revelation 7: 9-17

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'

For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

John 21: 20-25

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, 'Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?' When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about him?' Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!' So the rumour spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?'

This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.