

The Dash

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

My great-grandmother (whom the great-grandchildren called 'Big Nana') lived to be 92 years old – and although to most of us that would seem like a very long time to live – I always remember Big Nana saying, *“as you get older you’ll begin to realize that life seems to pass us by very quickly”* ... which reminds me now of Psalm 90 – where the author says, *“Teach me, O Lord, the shortness of life that I might gain wisdom of heart.”* ... and then my great grandmother would always tell us to *“live each day to the fullest – because you never know – when it will come to an end”* ...

Preaching professor and pastor, The Rev. David Buttrick, puts it well when he says, “our lives are as brief as the dash in between the dates on a gravestone” ... in other words, it’s not how LONG we live – but how WELL (and how FULL) we live...

We know that Jesus only lived to the age of 33 – but our Bible says that he lived the dash fully (giving glory to God by his faithful and loving obedience to the Father)... and in our reading this morning from John’s Gospel Jesus, wanting those who love him to share in the same fullness of life, Jesus says, “I have come so that they may have life – and have it more abundantly” ... meaning that before our days pass us by we might get a taste of what it means to truly live and be alive...

You know, I’ve always laughed at the story of the airline pilot who radios the control tower and says, “Hey guys, I have good news and bad news... the bad news is that I’m lost... the good news is that I’m making great time” ... but I think that story loses its humor when I think about the truth of those words... how many of us walk through life lost?... and yet, hurrying from one place to the other – hoping that we’re making good time – but never really finding real joy (or true purpose – or a deeper meaning)... and always wondering to ourselves, “Where am I really going with all of this?... and what’s the point?” ...

A few years ago Erma Bombeck wrote about a man named Terry Anderson, who spent a large portion of his life in prison... and in it she writes the following words, “You cannot get a refund or a credit on the days of your lives... once you’ve lived them - they’re gone” ...

And she goes on to say that Terry Anderson, a man forced to live in a prison, was himself determined to live each day – one hour at a time,,, and he wasn’t going to

let his situation take away the right to live... because he knew there'd be no refund...

And so, in prison he decided to play the hand that he was dealt – with faith, a bit of anger at times, a dose of humor, and an awful lot of help from his friends... and Erma Bombeck makes the point that although the conditions of our loves might not always be perfect (and so often they're not) that doesn't mean that we should ever stop living (and dreaming, and hoping, and giving the best of ourselves every single day)...

Jesus says, "I have come so that you may have life, and have it more abundantly"... but haven't you ever wondered, "What would an abundant life really look like?"...

Well, when we look at the life of our Lord we see that it looks like a man who was in a right relationship with God, and with people, and with all of creation... it looks like a man who trusted that he was truly loved by God... it looks like a man who made 'telling others about God's love' his life goal... it looks like a man who was not afraid to reach out to others who were different from himself – a Samaritan, a Canaanite woman, a group of men suffering from leprosy, or a woman suffering from a hemorrhage (for 12 long years)...

"I have come", Jesus says, "so that you may have life – and have it more abundantly"... and an abundant life looks like one who lived as a simple carpenter's son (in a simple town) and yet changed the world... who everyday gave priority to communing with God in prayer... it looks like one who, at times, had nowhere to lay down his head (and yet, kept on going)... one who believed that all of creation was special (and he took time to soak it all in): whether it be the lilies of the field, the sparrows of the air, the seeds and the sheep, the light and the darkness... the wheat, the wind and the water... an abundant life in the eyes of Jesus is appreciating every single thing – and never taking any of it for granted..

But most importantly, it looks like one who loved the gift of his own life so much (and knew that the only way in keeping it – was to give it all away)...

So what is it that keeps us from having an abundant life?... from living life fully – as Jesus did?...

Well, some might say that fear would probably surface as one of the reasons... fear at what others might think of us if we got serious about our faith... fear of

failure... fear of not being in control... fear of all that is new and different... fear of change...

And besides fear, some of us are still burdened with baggage from the past: burdened with being hurt, or betrayed, or disappointed...

but as we think right now of where we are today – and in light of the dash between the dates of our own tombstones – what do all of these things really matter?... why should we let anything (and anyone) keep us from making the most of our lives?... and why shouldn't we follow that path that Jesus made (and trust him enough to receive what it is he wants to give us)... an abundant and full life (that not only feeds the soul – but also brings a sense of purpose and meaning)...

Now most of us already know someone for whom the final date on that gravestone has been filled (perhaps even in the past few years)... and most likely, as they came to the end of their lives - and they looked back – perhaps for the first time they too realized what was truly important in their own lives...

In fact, I remember a woman named Marilyn Brauer (who was a long time member of our congregation and had gotten very sick) tell me that it wasn't money, or a job or a career, or a house... it was so much more than that... it was the moments she remembered being in love and being loved... it was friends... it was family... it was laughter and happiness... and how quickly those moments slip through our fingers... "Enjoy your life now Pastor" she'd often remind me... "Enjoy it now!"... because none of it lasts forever...

I think of Dolly Brice (another beloved member of this congregation who passed away about 10 years ago) tell me towards the end of her life that she trusted that God would see her through... and it was *faith without fear* that gave her abundant life even in her last days... and no matter her situation she wasn't going to let anything keep her from living that abundant life that her Savior blessed her with (even in her sickness)... (and I have to tell you – she was quite an inspiring woman – she really was)...

You know, the gift that people who are suffering or dying offer us is the daily reminder of how precious and fragile life really is... Right?... when we're healthy *and able* we all have the tendency to lose perspective about life and about things that should really matter... but the Dolly Brice's and the Marilyn Brauer's remind us today to live life abundantly (full of the blessings of God) – and to make the most of the dash that will one day appear on our tombstone...

We know from reading our bibles what an abundant life looked like for Jesus, but I also hope that you take the time to wonder (like a child) what it might be like for you?... What would it be like to live out your dreams – to do the things that you keep putting off?... what would it feel like to forgive someone or let go of the past?... what would it look like if you had the abundant life that Jesus is offering you today?... and what kind of joy would that bring you?... and even more importantly – what are you waiting for?...

Right now (in this moment) we all have the gift of life (and the opportunity to really think about what our priorities should be in face of eternity)... and Jesus has come so that we might have that blessing – and have it to the fullest... and in doing just that – living fully – we're told in scripture that God is glorified by each moment of our existence...

And so as a way to close my message for you this morning let me read to you a very short poem titled, 'The Dash' by Linda Ellis... It begins:

I read of a man who stood to speak at the funeral of a friend.
He referred to the dates on her casket from beginning to the end.
And he noted that first came the date of her birth
(and he spoke of those memories with a flood of joyful tears),
but he said what mattered most of all was the dash in between those years.
For that dash represents all the time that she spent alive on earth
and now only those who loved her most - knew what that little line was worth.

For it matters not, how much we own: (the cars, the house, the cash),
What matters is how we live (and love) and how we spend our dash.

So think about this long and hard; Are there things you would like to change?
For you never know how much time is left that can still be rearranged...
If we could just slow down enough to consider what is true and what is real
and always try to understand the way other people feel.

And be less quick to anger and show our gratitude more
and love the people in our lives (like we have never loved before).

If we treat each other with respect and more often with a smile,
Remembering that this special dash might only last a little while.

So when your eulogy is being read with your life's actions to rehash...

Would you be proud of the things they say (about how you spent your dash?)

May the Lord open your eyes this morning to see the shortness of life... May you be filled with a desire to live fully and holy... but most importantly – may you always remember that no matter where life leads – God is always with us (now and forever)...

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In Jesus name we pray...

Amen!