

Genesis 15:1-6

Psalm 33:12-22

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO, RECTOR OF ALL HALLOWS PARISH, SOUTH RIVER, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND, ON THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, AUGUST 11, 2013, AT ALL HALLOWS CHAPEL AND THE BRICK CHURCH.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good morning, my beloved friends. It's good to be back! Being away in the Hawaiian Islands, sometimes called "paradise" on earth, has helped me to ponder anew about life and vocation. Interestingly, a recent report in the Huffington Post states that the "hang loose" island lifestyle has helped people in Hawaii achieve a much higher life expectancy than their counterparts in the mainland.¹ In general, most of us think having a longer lifespan is a good thing.

So, let me ask you a not so hypothetical question to start:

If you had the opportunity to live until you were one hundred and twenty years old, would you accept the offer?

I said this question is not so hypothetical because advances in technology and the medical sciences are now pointing to radical life extension. This past Tuesday, the Pew Research Institute issued a report on their in-depth study about how the American public views the prospect of life extension. This included extensive studies of different religions and faith traditions in order to ascertain their teachings and approach to radically extending human life. As the chair of our denomination's

¹ Gregoire, Carolyn, "What Hawaiians Can Teach The Rest of America About Living Better," August 4, 2013, Huffington Post

Executive Council Committee on Science, Technology and Faith, I was interviewed about the Episcopal Church's views about radical life extension.²

Subsequently, the Washington Post published an excerpt of that report, in which I was quoted, along with Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and an Islamic scholar. What a surprise! And what an honor!

The words in the article really sum up the application of our three-legged stool of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason, when it comes to life extension.

Quote:

"The Rev. Alistair So, chair of the Episcopal Church's Executive Council Committee on Science, Technology and Faith, told Pew there is nothing in the denomination's teaching against life extension, so long as it doesn't become 'the focus of life' and that [its] benefits were available for all."³

When it comes to "the focus of life," Jesus says the following in the Gospel of Luke:

"Sell your possessions. Give alms. Make for yourselves purses that do not age, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven. No thief can get in there! No moth can destroy there! Where your treasure is, in that place your heart also will be."

Jesus has nothing against longevity. Rather, he urges us to live a life radically oriented toward to the Kingdom of God, whatever the length of that life may be. With that in mind, he says to the disciples:

"Do not fear, little flock: it has pleased your father to give you the kingdom!"

Jesus is speaking these words near to the time of his arrest, betrayal, and death. He is reassuring his disciples in two dimensions -- one is not to fear dying; and the other is not to fear living.

² <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/08/06/religious-leaders-views-on-radical-life-extension/>

³ Boorstein, Michelle; Bahrapour, Tara, "Americans sharply divided about dramatically extending human lifespan, poll finds," The Washington Post, August 6, 2013

In asking us to sell our possessions to give alms, Jesus is urging us to live the life of the Kingdom to the fullest in the here and now. Jesus' teaching on almsgiving is powerful, it will even reverberate in later rabbinic literature in Judaism. The idea is that almsgiving will bring great heavenly rewards. The more profound truth here is that it is only through genuine giving and sharing that we can free ourselves from the anxieties of life.

Yet at the time Jesus is teaching this to the disciples, to not fear dying and to not fear living, they are bombarded with threats and uncertainties from all sides. And when human beings feel a threat, we become tense and go into the fight or flight mode. Oftentimes, such a response, although it may be instinctual, is ultimately counterproductive. For example, lifeguards know that when a swimmer in distress panics in the water, it becomes difficult to provide help, as the swimmer's entire focus is on grabbing hold of the rescuer, rather than listening to instructions. Similarly, human beings are likely to grasp more tightly to what they have when they perceive there's a threat to their lives or to their way of living. What Jesus has said is truly very challenging. The disciples are in a state of panic. They grab hold onto the Jesus they think they know and will not let go. What are we holding onto that we will not let go?

It is only through letting go of the Jesus that the disciples once knew that they would finally meet the Risen Christ. For us, it is only through letting go of that which we have idolized in our lives and ministries that we will come to a place of genuine spiritual happiness and fulfillment.

So, in terms of radical life extension, the topic we started with, if we want more life because we fear death, then we will likely make life extension the focus of life, which is what I would warn against. In that case, it would be like "chasing after the wind," as the Teacher in Ecclesiastes tells us. But if through radical life extension, we become more available to give, more available to share, whether of our wealth, or of our time, or of our various gifts and talents, then we will be more in sync with Christ's teaching here, as we "make for ourselves purses that do not age, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven."

Okay. You may say that it all sounds good as a sermon - let's not worry about dying and not worry about living. But how does one do that after Sunday? How does one

not panic when swimming in distress? How does one not panic when we perceive a threat? A swimmer who is able to listen and follow the lifeguard will be saved. When we panic spiritually, if we can listen to the still, small voice of God and follow it, we too shall be saved.

In the tradition of the Church, many forms of devotions aim to train our minds to listen to that still, small voice of God. One technique is single-minded breathing, such as the practice of the Jesus Prayer, in which, the ascetic would recite each word with proper inhalation and exhalation. The Rosary recitation can also help us train our mindfulness for the Kingdom of God.

Experts in the secular world promote similar techniques. In a recent article in the New Yorker magazine, entitled “Mentally Fit,” author Patricia Marx writes about the recommendations of Louisa Parks, a clinical neuropsychologist and brain coach for mindfulness training. In this training, the practitioner learns to pay attention selectively and, as she put it, “to remain in the present, rather than to wallow and worry about the past and catastrophize the future.” Marx writes that this included, and I quote, “an exercise that involved devoting my thoughts exclusively to my breath. If one masters single-minded breathing, a theory has it, one will also become adept at concentrating on non-respiratory concerns.”⁴

Friends, are you good at breathing? That may be the place to start, for biblically, it is the breath of God - the Ruach - that gave life to Adam the first human. Being aware of our breathing and our source of life will help re-orient our perspectives, regardless of the situation around us. And indeed, that's one reason why studies show that Hawaiians live longer even though they also have the bills to pay, and the changes and chances of life to deal with. They seem to know to take it easy. They seem to know how to "hang loose," not fear living, and breathe easier!

With that in mind, my brothers and sisters, let us take a deep breath, and live our life of faith to the fullest, God willing.

Amen.

⁴ Marx, Patricia, “Mentally Fit - Workouts at the brain gym,” pp.24-28, The New Yorker, July 29, 2013