

WHAT ARE YOU DOING FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE?

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It's funny how some things stay with you for quite awhile and have special meaning to you. Sometimes songs are like that. For no reason you just find yourself humming the tune or singing the words under your breath. A number of years ago Frank Sinatra sang a love song by Alan and Marilyn Bergman.ⁱ

What are you doing the rest of your life?
North and South and East and West of your life
I have only one request of your life
That you spend it all with me

All the seasons and the times of your days
All the nickels and the dimes of your days
Let the reasons and the rhymes of your days
All begin and end with me

Can you imagine it being sung some moonlit night two lovers arm in arm looking into each others eyes? Can you imagine it being sung to you today on this Sunday morning? Sung to you by God? "What are you doing the rest of your life?" God asks us, "Spend it with me."

That is the message, the question that the passage from Isaiah asks us.ⁱⁱ

A troubadour, a balladeer, comes into town on a festive day, perhaps a market day. People are everywhere. Farmers and merchants mill around selling their produce fresh from the fields and vineyards, baskets of barley and grapes and figs, jars of olives and pressed oil. and they greet the minstrel with eager and attentive ears. "I'm going to sing you a love song," he says, "a love song about my beloved and his vineyard."

"It was love at first sight. The fertile hill beckoned him to plant there and so he did. He dug the soil, he cleared the stones, he planted the very finest vines, choice vines, the best that could be planted. He even built a stone wall around it to protect it to keep the animals out, and a watch tower from which to oversee it. In the field he hewed out a wine vat in which to tread the grapes. It was an act of love and passion, - but it was for naught."

"Every grape was sour," the minstrel sang.

Stinkers might be a better way of translating the Hebrew. The word used is also used to describe rotten fruit and decaying fish.ⁱⁱⁱ

"What more could my friend do?" he continued to the farmers and customers in the streets of Jerusalem. "He invested so much of himself in that vineyard he loved, but it did not produce good grapes. What would you do with it?"

Surely many there had had this experience. Just like many farmers sometimes experience working hard all spring and summer but no harvest, no fruit to show for all their labour. They knew what unrequited love was about and so you can imagine what they shouted. Dig it up! Burn it! Plow it under! Tear down the walls and let the wild animals trample it! Don't waste one more moment on that worthless vineyard!

"Ah," the minstrel replied, "That is exactly what my friend thought as well." Everyone smiled and nodded their head in agreement. And then the singer who was not a minstrel at all but the prophet sang another verse,

You, Israel, you are this vineyard of God;
You, people of Judah, you are the vines God planted.
God expected you to do what was good,
But instead all the fruit God found in you was murder.
God expected to see the fruit of justice hanging from
your branches,
But all God hears are the cries of the oppressed.

God's people were uprooted by God from Egyptian soil and transplanted in a land flowing with milk and honey. They have been lovingly nurtured, watered, fertilized, bathed in the light of God's love, protected, cared for, but there has been so little fruit for the effort, so little return for the investment, just some sour grapes, some stinkers, so many squandering the efforts of God.

But this is a love song, a love song to Israel from God, a love song warning her of the path on which she treads, warning her of the certain outcome of her present life, inviting her back again. The parable ended with indictment and the execution of judgement, but the words of the prophet surrounding the parable include indictment but not the execution of the judgement. We must be careful in how we read this piece. The tone is not so much anger as sorrow and disappointment. There is still time. There is still time to return to God, and to become fruitful, to experience the loving relationship God wants to have with them and to bear the fruits of justice and right living. What are you doing the rest of your life? God offers.

There is a story of a conversation between a young and ambitious lad and an older man who knew life. What are you doing with the rest of your life?

Said the young man, "I will learn my trade."

"And then?" asked the older man.

"I will set up in business."

"And then?"

"I will make my fortune."

"And then?"

"I suppose that I shall grow old and retire and live on my money."

"And then?"

"Well, I suppose that some day I will die."

“And then?”^{iv}

What we choose to do today has an impact on the rest of our lives, indeed on the rest of eternity. More importantly, however, is the impact of our choice on this very day. Christians, you see, don't live as we live, do as we do, against our will, out of fear for tomorrow, or out of anticipation of reward. We are motivated by love, God's love for us, our loving relationship with God, our choice to spend the rest of our lives with God, beginning with God, ending with God and living in the between times with God. That's what righteousness is. Righteousness refers to that relationship with God which springs from loyalty to God's expectations of justice. Justice too is about relationships, the fair and equitable relationships among people and within society grounded in the justice of God and established through honest procedures.^v

What would our lives be like if they were lived in loving response to God's initiative, to God's love, caring and nurture?

Listen to the letter to the Hebrews once again. Speaking of our religious forebears he wrote, “Through faith [they] conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.”^{vi} That's what their lives were like. How about yours?

If you kept a diary what would you read most days? You rise. You shower and dress, eat breakfast. Glance at the newspaper. Then it's off to work where you do the usual things and get home after a fairly successful and satisfying day, or sometimes one that is not so good. In the evening, you catch a little television, read a book, play a game, go to a show. Time slips away and there isn't really all that much to chronicle. I recall a fellow I knew once who only recorded the weather in his diary. That was all that ever seemed to change.

What are the consequences of our faith? Where are they? How has a faith that was depicted as thrilling, tremendous, exciting, adventuresome, urgent, insistent, heroic, bold, something of valour, self-sacrifice and splendour, something that changed the world and turned it upside down, how has such a faith become the householder faith we have now, prosaic, uneventful, puny, controlled, tame and safe focussed more on comfort than challenge? Today if we keep our temper when irritated, if we choose unselfishly at some little decision, if we share some minor part of what we have, if we smile at a stranger, we liken it to a victory. Is that all God has called us to? Is that what God's love means and nothing more? What of our forebears and the lives they led in faithfulness? What of Christ the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, what of his sacrifice, what of the cross, what of the exceedingly great power that came into the world at Pentecost and into each one of us at our own

baptisms? What of all that? Is there no influence on what you are doing the rest of your life?

Surely it is no secret that churches everywhere in Canada are having difficulty. Numbers dwindle. People walk past giant edifices of the past and don't see them. They aren't part of their present. It doesn't occur to them that faith makes a difference. Even our own youth, indeed youth of every age not just this one, look to the churches with a critical eye and what they often see is boredom. When I speak to people outside of the church they more often than not don't say that they refrain from going to church for reasons of theology but simply because churches seem so boring and the Christian life resulting from them seems so undistinguished.

People want, youth want, as they have always wanted adventure, adventure, I think, in the terms that Dr. Bob McClure used to speak of it, adventure as risk with a purpose. What people want is meaning to their lives, something bigger and better than they might find on the streets of the world, something that makes a difference in their lives, something that will make a difference in the world, something that will use them and their lives to advantage and effect. For that they will give. For that they will sacrifice. For that they will live. For that they will die.

Tertullian in the second century wrote, "We are not worried by these persecutions for we have joined this Church fully accepting the terms of its agreement with us, as [people] whose

very souls are not our own.” Their souls have been joined in love to God’s spirit. They live in a loving relationship with God and fear has been cast out. Death takes on minor significance compared to the glory of a relationship with God. It has a profound effect on what they do the rest of their lives.

Likewise in this day and age there are those who are thrilled to be part of the enterprise of God, to work for justice, to live in righteousness. Archbishop Oscar Romero, martyred in his church for his stand on God’s side against injustice and oppression, wrote in the later years of his life,

Even when they call us mad
when they call us subversives
and all the epithets they put on us,
we know that we only preach
the subversive witness of the Beatitudes,
which have turned everything upside down,
to proclaim blessed the poor,
blessed the thirsting for justice,
blessed the suffering.^{vii}

No one wants death. No one sane wants to be martyred. And in our context that isn’t what most of us are being invited to. But we do want excitement. We do want to meet challenges that make a difference in the world, that make the world a better place, to put down evil, to right wrong, to save and uplift and glorify this ailing earth of ours. This is the invitation God makes

to us, to dare to join with God in this great and magnificent enterprise. Do we dare? Can we dare to do this with the rest of our lives? Of course, we can! Why? Because we have the same thing that the generations of our forebears had before us, the presence of God. We are not alone. God leads us only to those places God has been before in Christ Jesus, and is still waiting for us to join God.

What are you doing the rest of your life? This is the only life you have here. You will never have it to live again. Are you making the most of it? Are you making it count? Are you living it in love with God? May we each one of us hear and respond to God's love song with a verse of our own,

Through all of my life

Summer, Winter, Spring and Fall of my life

All I ever will recall of my life

Is all of my life with you.

So may it be for you and me. So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ Lyrics by Alan and Marilyn Bergman. Music by Michel Legrand. Written for the 1969 film *The Happy Ending*.

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 5: 1-7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Charles B. Cousar, *et.al.*, *Texts for Preaching (Year C)*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1994, pg. 470.

^{iv} William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The Westminster Press, 1975.

^v Fred B. Craddock, *et.al.*, *Preaching Through the Christian Year (Year C)*, Trinity Press International, 1994, pg. 371

^{vi} Hebrews 11: 33, 34.

^{vii} Archbishop Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love*.