

Dealing with Endings in Life! Matthew 24:36-44

This is the last week of our message series, "It's Never Too Late in Life," where we've said that it's never too late to make a new start, it's never too late to turn things around, it's never too late to share, and last week we talked about how it's never too late to do the right thing.

God's grace means that in almost every circumstance, we can change, repent, redo, revitalized, reconsider, revive, be renewed. But what about the exception to that rule? What about when endings come; when time runs out; when life runs out. Jobs end, businesses close, relationships end. A few weeks ago my cousin died at 64, but our relationship effectively ended when he and his mom moved to Oregon. He was mentally handicapped from injuries suffered in infancy so he couldn't read or write and wasn't on social media. We had a very good relationship but it ended when he moved. Things end and, of course, people die. In most ways it's never too late in life, sure, but what about when life ends?

William Willimon, former Duke University chaplain and former bishop of the North Alabama Conference, currently Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry at Duke Divinity School, tells the story of a funeral he attended early in his ministry while serving a small congregation in rural Georgia. A relative of a member died, and Willimon and his wife went to the funeral as guests of the member. It was at an off-brand, country Baptist church. Willimon says, "I had never seen anything like it. The preacher began to preach. He shouted; he flailed his arms and yelled, 'It's too late for Joe. He's dead. But it ain't too late for you. People drop dead every day. Why wait? Now is the day for decision. Give your life to Jesus.'"

There was no comfort for the family or honor given to the life of the person who'd died. Willimon thought it was one of the worst things he'd ever seen. He fumed and fussed at his wife Patsy, complaining that the preacher had done the worst thing possible for a grieving family - manipulating them with guilt and shame, almost blaming them for their relative's faults. Patsy agreed with him... But then she said: "Of course the worst part of it all is that everything he said is true."

There are times when fear can be an appropriate and positive response to situations in life. The Bible talks about some fear as negative - like in 1 John 4:18 where we're told, *"If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love."* Fear of punishment is a negative fear - it's reacting to God as if God were a threat to you. But John also recorded fear of God in a positive sense Revelation 15:4 says, *"Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed."* Fear, like many things, can be positive or negative. Fear that causes us to love and worship God; fear that causes us to take action to love others - like fearing that people will die in our community without knowing God's love - is a good and positive thing.

Too often we preachers avoid fear and go out of our way to make our words comfortable so we don't scare people. But today I want to generate a little positive fear in you. I want to talk about when things end and about the end of the world.

In the early church, believers were persecuted, tortured and put to death for their beliefs. There was a lot of negative fear possible, but they stuck heroically to their faith because their positive fear - their fear of betraying God and their fear for the lives and souls of others who needed to hear the Good News of Christ. The world was against them and to them it seemed that, surely, the end of the world was near.

In the middle centuries, disease - a horrific plague - swept across most of the world and, in some places, destroyed three quarters of the population. Can you imagine living in a place where only one out of four survived? Whole civilizations were paralyzed or incapacitated; nations fell; Europe descended into a dark age ripe with superstition and barbarism. And to many it seemed that, surely, the end of the world was near.

During the Second World War, it seemed like wildly nationalistic Nazi Germany would sweep across the world, installing an insane religion of hatred and fear. To many people it seemed that, surely, the end of the world was near.

In the second half of the 20th Century, we faced a world full of horrifying weapons and political tensions. Fingers were poised over buttons that would unleash mass destruction. and many people said that, surely, the end of the world was near.

And in this still young century, terrorism means that death can strike at any moment, practically any place. We can be randomly involved in a war that we're not even much aware of and the tensions and scope of the attacks seem to be growing. You know as well as I that there are lots of people who are saying that, surely, the end of the world is near.

And all of those people, in all of those times and places, were absolutely, unquestionably right. The end, surely is near. The end is always near. Always.

Now, there are some who would laugh to hear me say that and not take it seriously, which doesn't surprise me because, remember, Jesus said, *"As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man."* They didn't expect the flood. I don't expect the world to expect the end of the world or change because of it. Noah's neighbors were busy with their day to day concerns. They were eating and drinking and marrying - all normal, completely acceptable pursuits. But because they were caught up in those day to day concerns, they didn't expect God to show up.

"But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. You... must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."

The thing is, if you don't see the coming of the Lord - in your time, you will see a somewhat smaller, personal end in your own life. I don't know if you've heard, but that individual end is just as final - at least for you! The last time I checked the death rate is still 100%! Life is fatal! And it may be just as sudden and unexpected as the second coming of Jesus, so what needs to get done before then? Have you done all that you can do here in this world? What new start could you make? What circumstance could you still turn around? What word of hope, of grace, of love, what caring action could you take while it's not too late? What right thing could you still do?

Is your positive fear - your fear of what might be lost; your awe and love of God - strong enough to overcome your negative fear of what the world might do or what you might lose? Is your fear strong enough to be productive?

It's been said that the best preaching includes liberal doses of both fear and assurance. Positive fear leads us to assurance. Anyone who's ever worked with sheep knows that they are so stupid that the only way to get them to go where you want them to go is to make any other choice of direction seem more frightening. It's not by chance that the Lord, so often, refers to us as sheep. We, like sheep, are infuriatingly short sighted and have to be driven to safety.

I praise God that we don't know when the end of the world or the end of our own lives will come. It's so easy to put off all of the things we need to get done. Every Valentine's Day people rush around at the last second for gifts or dinner reservations. Every Christmas Eve Wal-Mart is full of people. We've known all year it was coming but we got too busy.

We can't afford to be too busy for God; too busy for love; too busy for caring; too busy for sharing the Good News. Not knowing how long we have left means that it's always urgent.

Our lives as believers are lived like we're living on a sinking ship. If you've had a quarrel with your spouse, your parent, your child, your friend, your brother or sister, it doesn't seem as important if you're both on a boat that's going under! Who do you need to tell that you love them? Who do you need to forgive? What needs to be put in order?

If you're on a sinking ship, you need to warn the others on the ship with you. There's a story about a sinking boat. The captain yells to a passenger - a church member - to go to people and tell them the boat is sinking, the end is near, and they need to get to safety. The church member respectfully declines, saying, "I've never done that before or been trained to do that sort of thing. Someone else could do it better."

Brothers and sisters... training is a wonderful thing and we're working hard to provide as much as possible... **BUT THE SHIP IS SINKING!** And *"...about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. You... must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."*

We need to understand the time we live in. Paul said in Romans 13:11-12a, *"...do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here."* It's time for you and me and for our church and all churches to wake up and see there's a lot to be done.

Many people in declining churches are waiting for the someone to come who will turn things around. We're waiting for people to provide meaningful worship and meaningful programs and meaningful ministries. We're waiting for the time when people will come and step up and make it all work.

Well, the time has come... and we are the people we've been waiting for!

It's not going to be the next program or the next new member or some staff person or some pastor who will turn things around - that's not how it works. It's God's people being the people God means them to be. All a leader can do is try to inspire people and channel efforts. It's you, whatever age you are or ability you have, who's the right

person for the job - because it's not you, but Christ working in you that matters. It's your willingness to let Christ work in and through you that matters.

Tell story: "Paul" - Hospice Care - Windows right up to the sidewalk. Window open on cold day. Glanced in. Woman holding older woman's hand who was slumped in chair. Woman asked him to hold her hand while she went for help. Reached through open window to hold the hand of dying woman. She stopped breathing. She never knew him, but he held her hand at the end of her life. She wasn't alone.

Each one of us lives in the shadow of death and the shadow of the apocalypse - the dark reality of the end of our time and the end of the world's time. But there's the promise that even while we're in the darkness, in the shadows, in the unpredictable anxiety of our lives, God is present. God is at work, and God will come again. Wherever there is darkness and dread in our lives or in the world around us, God is present, God is at work, and hope is alive.

Because no one but the Father knows when any end will come, we can't live as speculators, guessing about the future. As believers, we are custodians of the sacred promise of the coming reign of God. We place our trust in Jesus Christ, the one who made this promise.

Jesus tells us how we should **not** go about this. We're not to be like Noah's contemporaries, going about business-as-usual when catastrophe looms. Jesus also says we can't be like the head of household who isn't vigilant. Because the householder fails to keep watch, the thief breaks in and plunders. We can't run on auto-pilot, enjoying our comforts, paying little attention to warnings about the coming judgment of God. Jesus warns there's a price to pay for negligence.

And "...about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. You... must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."

As I said, there are many ways that ends can come. Through the end of eras, through the ends of organizations, through death, through many things.

Ends can come to churches - to congregations.

I'm doing my doctoral work in church revitalization - in turning around churches after years and decades of decline. I got into that subject after I was blessed to be able to pastor a new church start and then, realizing that there was more potential for growth in turning churches around, went full scale into research, looking at churches that had been revitalized. God provided just the right resources at the right time and I took major training in church turn-around from the acknowledged experts in the field. I read everything I could get my hands on. I talked with pastors who had turned churches around. Then I went and we successfully revitalized a church. I was so excited that I wanted to study it more but didn't have the funds at that point to take it to the next level.

When my parents passed away they left me the funds to pursue a doctorate, so I began doing that two years ago. I'm finishing up the academic phase of that doctorate right now - I've completed two years of my program. I have closely studied the research on over 500 churches that have been revitalized. I have read every major book published on the subject during the past 20 years and most of the minor texts. I have begun the research phase of my doctorate - which will continue for the next two years.

Between my experience, training, conversations with pastors and leaders, reading and research into many, many churches... God has taught me a great deal. Most churches and most leaders have little or no concept about what it really takes to revitalize a church or even how long it takes - by the way, it takes four years from when you actually start the effort before you can even have reliable indicators about whether it is going in the right direction and it's a minimum of ten years before you can know that it's really working and not just because of short-term effects because of the charisma of a particular pastor or leader or some exciting time. Turn-arounds based on those things don't tend to last.

The thing is, with congregations, it's never too late to turn things around and grow in every sense. It's never too late, that is, until it's too late. There comes a point when downward momentum becomes so great that the end becomes inevitable. The thing is, though, research clearly shows that the point at which it's too late has nothing to do with numbers - it has to do with attitude. Let me say that again: it has nothing to do with numbers - it has to do with attitude. Attitude that make decline inevitable are often in the church as much as 20-30 years before decline even begins to show in numbers.

Our congregation is now at a turning point. We are at an exciting moment when we can unite as one congregation and really make a difference in this community; really change things - but we have to choose to do it.

We are at the point when we can begin to grow - but we have to choose to do it. We can become more than we've ever been; we can fulfill the promise begun by those who founded the revival movement we are a part of - but we have to choose to do it.

Or we can choose the attitudes that lead to decline and death. And *"...about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. You... must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."*

The thing is, we can do this, but, we've been brainwashed into thinking that we can't do this; that most of us are powerless to make a difference and make disciples for Christ. Our ideas of discipleship making have been distorted into something they're not meant to be!

We've been brainwashed into believing that we have to be completely on fire, out front, extroverts to do this. We've been brainwashed into thinking that we have to be some kind of super Christian that is always fired up, bubbling over and zealous to make and grow disciples. We look at the BPOGs - the Big People Of God - in history and in our own church's past and we know we can't do what they did. The fact is, you don't have to! If you feel like you've just barely got a spark, that's all it takes! Don't wait for some big feeling; just do it!

We've been brainwashed into believing that we have to be Biblical experts to be able to do this. Brainwashed into thinking we need absolutely clear and concise knowledge; know it forwards and backwards and have all the answers. The fact is, in the early church, when the church grew the fastest, very few people had that kind of knowledge. Most people were illiterate and only knew as much of the scriptures as they had heard others share. What they knew was who Jesus Christ is, what that meant for their lives and what they needed to do about it. They listened to their pastors and learned to live what the scriptures taught.

Because of education and the printed word and the internet, we now have opportunities they never had and it's wonderful and we certainly SHOULD be reading and studying the Bible and learning all we can. But if we let learning about faith take the place of living it and doing it, we've missed the whole point and all our knowledge is useless.

We've been brainwashed into believing that we have to be trained to do this. Brainwashed into thinking we need some type of formalized steps to lead people through. You don't need training to share and witness. It's time to do what you've been clearly called to do: to make disciples.

We've been brainwashed into believing we have to have some special permission to do this; into thinking we need some special blessing to speak about faith to someone, to mentor them, to guide them. If you're waiting for my blessing, you've got it! Go and make disciples of ALL of them!

The making of disciples isn't a path inward for the un-churched to take; It is a path outward that the believers in the church take. It's not up to them to come to us, it's clearly, Biblically, plainly, unmistakably up to us to go to them.

The making of disciples isn't an institutional thing; It's relational. It's not some program or something left up to the staff of the church. People use the phrase "I love 'em to death"; this is about you loving them to life.

The making of disciples isn't accidental; it's purposeful. We are commanded to do this - it's not a suggestion in the Bible. Jesus tells us to go and do it. The thing is, we know that, so we have no excuse. You have no excuse. Proverbs 24:12 says, *"Don't excuse yourself by saying, 'Look, we didn't know.' For God understands all hearts, and he sees you. He who guards your soul knows you knew. He will repay all people as their actions deserve."*

The thing is, the fact that there will be an end to things is good news. God hasn't abandoned us. God is coming and God will bring us home.

The universe isn't some meaningless wind-up toy that's slowly running down and that entropy will eventually kill. It all has a place, we have a place, I have a place, you have a place in God's plan. And there's an appointed hour when that plan will become plain and clear.

It's good news that all of the hunger and pain we see around us won't go on forever. The evils of greed, prejudice and hate won't win out. People won't cry out for justice forever - they will be satisfied.

Are you prepared? Have you accomplished all that God would want you to accomplish? Are you watching and working for that time that is coming; that time that is always near? I pray that you are, because... *"...about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. You... must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."* Let's pray.