Sunday, September 22, 1991
IT'S YOUR FUNERAL (No. 4 in a Series: Living from the Inside Out)
Mark 9:30-37

It's a beautiful day, and you see yourself driving toward this church, or maybe a funeral parlor or chapel. As you enter the building, you smell the flowers and hear the organ music. You see the faces of friends and family. You feel the common sorrow of loss and the joy of having known the person that radiates from the people there.

As you approach the open casket, you suddenly come face to face with yourself. This is your funeral, three years from today. All these people have come to honor you, to express feelings of love and appreciation for your life. You notice that in addition to the minister, there are to be four speakers. The first is from your family — immediate and extended — children, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandchildren who have come from all over the country to attend. The second speaker is one of your friends, someone who can give a sense of what you were as a person outside your family. The third speaker is from your work or profession. And the fourth is from your church or some community organization where you've been involved in service beyond yourself.

Think about it. What would you like each of these speakers to say about you and your life?

What kind of husband, wife, mother, or father would you like their words to reflect? What kind of grandparent? What kind of friend were you to others outside your family? How would one of your associates at work describe your life? What character would you like them to have seen in you? Were you an example that others might like to follow? What contributions, what achievements, what personal characteristics would you want them to remember? Look at the people attending your funeral. What difference would you like to have made in their lives?

Remember, these speakers are going to tell the truth about you as they know it. I've been to some funerals and wondered if I was at the right one because the person described by the minister or other speakers was not the person I knew.

And when you die, you will not only be remembered and judged by family members, friends, and other people, but also by God. Although it matters what you think of yourself at the end of your life and what others think of you, only God's judgment truly counts. Will God say, "Well done, good and faithful servant," and "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me"? Or will God say, "I never knew you," and "As you did it not to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it not to me"?

Not too many years ago, it was common practice to have an epitaph inscribed on one's tombstone that summed up a life in a few words or one short sentence. Some were inspiring. One epitaph said, "In the worst of times, he did the best of things." Someone once said that on Johnny Carson's tombstone, there should be only two words—"Here's Johnny." One person had written on his tombstone, "On the whole, I'd rather be in Philadelphia." A hypochondriac's tombstone said, "See, I told you I was sick." I found one epitaph that said, "In memory of Charles Ward, who died May 1770, aged 63 years. A dutiful son, a loving brother, and an affectionate husband." Then a footnote added, "This stone was not erected by Susan, his wife. She erected a stone to John Salter, her second husband, forgetting the affection of Charles Ward, her first husband."

Why did I begin by asking you to think of the end of your life? Because by honestly thinking about how you want to be thought of and remembered at the end of your life, you can reveal some of your deep, fundamental values. Furthermore, beginning with the end in mind can help guide you in your everyday behavior, in your choices and decisions. Then each part of your life can be examined in the context of the whole, of what really matters most to you.

To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means knowing where you are going so that you better understand where you are now, and so that the steps you take are always in the right direction. Some people are like the man on a trip who said he was making great time but didn't know where he was or where he was going.

And hopefully, by beginning with the end in mind, you will discover that you have the right kind of end in mind rather than the wrong end. According to our Christian faith, some ends are worthy of achieving, and others are not. I knew a man years ago whose only goal in life at age 30 was to have a net worth of one million dollars by the time he was 40. Everything else in his life was sacrificed in his attempt to meet this goal, including his family, which he lost in the process. He also sacrificed some of his inner principles — honesty and integrity. Not only did he not achieve his goal, but he lost his soul in the process. God would call this man "a fool."

There are also people who, although they accomplish their goals, find themselves achieving victories that are empty — successes that have come at the expense of things they suddenly realize were more valuable to them. People from every walk of life — doctors, academicians, actors, ministers, politicians, business professionals, athletes, and executives — often struggle to achieve a higher income, more recognition, more status, only to find that their drive to achieve these goals blinded them to the things that really mattered most and are now gone.

The first step is to be sure we have the correct end in mind, and then how different our lives become when we truly know what is deeply important to us, and keeping that picture in mind, we manage ourselves each day to be and to do what really matters most.

Of course, if the end we have in mind is not the correct one in the first place, then every step we take only gets us to the wrong place faster. Someone has said, "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things." Or "management is efficiency in climbing the ladder of success; leadership determines whether the ladder is leaning against the right wall." It seems to me that parents today are often trapped in the management pattern, thinking of control, efficiency, and rules instead of direction, purpose, and family feeling.

I mentioned in a sermon several weeks ago that we human beings are people who easily deceive ourselves. We like to say that one thing is the most important in our lives, but a look at the way we live reveals something quite the opposite. As an example, I mentioned that a recent survey conducted by the Princeton Survey Research Associates produced the following results: 40% said that faith in God was the most important thing in their lives, yet other surveys showed that in actual day-to-day living, faith in God is far down the list of what's most important in people's lives.

Furthermore, we often choose the wrong people as our role models.

To put it another way, I believe we live in a culture that confuses celebrities with heroes and heroines. The people that are lauded and featured on the covers of popular magazines are not the fulfilled, happy, balanced persons that we imagine them to be. This definition of a celebrity is still valid: "A celebrity is someone who is known for being known." I've always liked what

Henry Kissinger said about being a celebrity: “The nice thing about being a celebrity is that when you bore people, they think it’s their fault.” Isn’t it true that we also frequently confuse heroism and greatness with the making of the most money? In other words, we have a lot of trouble with definitions of greatness.

I like what Philip Yancey, the author, said about greatness in human beings: “As I look back over the people in my own life who have manifested the greatest wisdom, they include the following: a patient at a leprosarium in India; a civil rights worker who worked out his theology in a jail cell; a mother who lost two children to cystic fibrosis; a priest who took a vow of chastity, poverty, and obedience and now works at a home for the severely disabled; a minister turned innkeeper who runs a hotel for the homeless. At one point in my life, I pitied such people. Then I came to admire them. And now I envy them.”

This matter of who’s the greatest and having the right end in mind is not a new problem. The Bible reports that Jesus had been trying to explain to his disciples that one day, not too far off, he would be arrested, put on trial, and executed. He also told them that this would not be the end, that he would rise again. The disciples didn’t want to hear this. Instead, they began to argue among themselves as to who was the greatest or the most important.

We don’t know their definition of “greatness,” but we do know it wasn’t what Jesus had in mind. Perhaps one was claiming, “I am the favorite of Jesus,” or another said, “Our teacher loves me more than the rest of you,” or “I’ll be in charge if and when our leader is no longer with us,” or “I am a better teacher than the rest of you,” or “I’m more spiritual.”

No doubt, beneath the disciples’ question about who among them was the greatest was a deeper question. They were asking as individuals, “Am I a significant person?” “Do I have worth?” “Would anyone miss me if I were no longer here?” If we live from the outside in rather than the inside out, then we are always worried most about what kind of impression we are making on others. We are concerned too much about our image on the outside and not enough about what is going on inside. Some time ago, I heard a psychologist say, “The vast majority of young people between the ages of twelve and twenty that I have observed are bitterly disappointed with who they are and what they represent. In a world that worships superstars and miracle men and women, they look in the mirror for signs of greatness, seeing only a terminal case of acne.”

However, young people are not alone in this personal devaluation. Each period of life poses its own unique threats to self-esteem. Perhaps it’s because we have the wrong end and the wrong definition of greatness in mind. That’s what Jesus was trying to tell his disciples and what he is trying to tell us.

Because God has so made us with imagination and the ability to look at ourselves, we can examine our deepest values. We can look at our goals and also question whether or not we are living in harmony with those goals.

As people of the Christian tradition, there are certain ends or goals that are to be primary in our lives. I’ve always liked the way the first question in the Westminster Catechism put it: “What is the chief end of man?” or, to use more inclusive language, “What is the chief end of human beings?” The answer: “To glorify God and enjoy God forever.”

But you ask, “What does it mean to glorify God?” The Bible answers this question in several specific ways. When Jesus learned that his disciples had been arguing among themselves as

to who was the greatest, he called his disciples together for a meeting and told them, “If anyone would be first, that one must be last of all and servant of all.” And then Jesus took a child into his arms and said, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me, but God who sent me.”

Why a child? Because a little child is vulnerable and, in comparison to adults, helpless. By using a child as an illustration, Jesus meant to include all those persons among us who need our love and care in any way. The way we treat people is the way we treat God. In other words, we glorify God by loving and caring for others. And according to God’s standards, that’s also the way we achieve greatness. This can be done wherever we live or work.

We also glorify God by fulfilling our own potential as much as possible. If I can be personal for a moment: When I began my ministry thirty-four years ago, my goal or the end I had in mind was to be the best minister possible with the talents God gave me, wherever I might be called to serve. Coequal with this goal was to be a loving husband and father. I have never seen these two basic goals as being in competition but as complementing each other.

What I want to suggest to you today is that you do your best to determine what your goals are in this life. Then ask if these are proper ones in the light of your Christian faith and if not, change them. That’s living from the inside out. If you do this, not only will you have a life of joy and fulfillment, but when it’s time for your funeral, God will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Amen.