Sunday November 16, 2003

WHEN YOUR TIME IS UP

Mark 13:1-8

Eddie was a grizzled war veteran who felt he was trapped in a meaningless life of fixing rides at a seaside amusement park. In the same way that the park had changed over the years from its simple rides to more complicated ones, Eddie had also changed from being an optimistic youth to embittered old age. His days had become a dull routine of work, loneliness and regret.

Then on his 83rd birthday, Eddie died in a tragic accident while trying to save a little girl from a falling cart. As he took his final breath, he felt two small hands in his and then nothing. In the story, he regains consciousness in the afterlife, where he

experiences heaven not as a lush paradise, but a place where your earthly life is explained to you by five people who were in it when you were alive and who have preceded you in death. Some of these people were loved ones and others distant strangers. Yet each of them changed your life forever but you did not know it at the time. In the after-life Eddie got a chance to look back and discover that his life on earth made more sense than he realized at the time.

This is the plot of a new best-selling novel entitled ***THE FIVE PEOPLE YOU MEET IN HEAVEN*** by Mitch Albom, whose previous book, ***TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE,*** is still a best seller. Eddie didn't know when his time would be up on this earth. He

only knew that one day his life would end but he never thought about it very much.

Like Eddie, you and I do not know when our time will be up. The fact that your life will end can be threatening to you when your life is filled with opportunities, good friends, and a hopeful future. On the other hand, if your life is filled with pain and suffering and little to look forward to, the fact that your life will end can be comforting.

If you are an older person like Eddie, perhaps you think more about the end of your life than he did. Maybe you prepare for it and put things in order. If you are not ill and if you are busy in the middle of life or if you are quite young, you tend to think less

about when your time will be up. The fact is, no matter what your age, your time will be up and you do not know for sure when that will be or how it will happen.

If you've ever thought about when your time might be up, you've probably asked yourself these questions or at least considered them. If you knew that you had only one month to live, would you finish up important matters at work? Would you travel to a place you always wanted to go if your health would allow it? Would you pray more, go to church more, or do that generous act you always wanted to do for others? Would you find a place to leave a mark on the world? Would you try to reconcile a broken relationship?

If you answered “yes” to any one or more of these questions, you have implied that you would try to make your last days in this life better than the life you are living now. You are saying that in the intensity of your last days, you would be more generous, more focused on the important things in life. Now comes the key question: why do you need to be under the threat of death to do what you believe should be done or to do the things you’ve always wanted to do?

Of course it’s possible that if you knew you had only one month to live, you would change nothing, but you would keep right on doing what you are now doing, going to work and paying your bills and spending too much time at the office or factory.

"What if" questions are always difficult to answer. There is a kind of impracticality to living each day as if it were the end when you're not really sure that it is.

Jesus calls you to do two things at the same time: to live with the knowledge that your time could be up today or tomorrow and to live your life as if you have many years left to live. Those are the two main points of the story from Mark's gospel read earlier.

The story goes like this. As Jesus and his disciples are leaving the magnificent Temple complex in Jerusalem, one of his disciples comments on the size of the building and its surroundings and implies

that because of the way it is constructed and what it symbolizes, it will last forever. It is the gate to heaven. He couldn't imagine the Temple ever not being there.

I know the feeling. Every morning when I come to work in this beautiful church building, I am inspired by its architecture and its over-all beauty. I like to think it will be here forever. You probably feel the same way not only about beautiful religious buildings but other impressive structures as well. I always admire our state capitol building in Lincoln. Every time I go to Washington D.C. I am moved by many of our government buildings. When the two World Trade Center towers were destroyed by the

terrorists several years ago, most of us could not imagine that they would not be there forever.

When I have traveled in other countries, I have been inspired by the beauty of many cathedrals. Each time I have been in St. Peter's in Rome, I have been overwhelmed. The same is true of some of the ancient Egyptian temples and the pyramids.

So I can understand what the Temple meant to the people of Israel. It was the symbol of their deepest religious traditions from the past and it gave them hope for the future. Therefore I can also understand the shock of the disciples and others when they heard Jesus say, "Do you see these

great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

He didn't have to be clairvoyant to make this prediction. He was reminding his followers that every humanly designed and constructed temple or institution eventually will come tumbling down. Every structure and system and doctrine for housing the holy will wear out its use; will come to an end. St. Paul wrote: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." It's tempting to confuse the vessel with the treasure and to believe that the vessel will be here forever.

You can name any temple you prefer, any ground that is sacred to you because at one time or another

God met you there—a church building, a neighborhood, a sunset, watching the ocean waves, a family, a friendship, a precious memory or dream—they all have a life-span and they all come to an end. They are all finite.

In this story from Mark's gospel, Jesus was using the Temple in Jerusalem as an example to illustrate that all things on this earth come to an end including your life and mine. That's important to remember. Can you name anything in life which does not change or go away? When someone asks me when the world is coming to an end, my answer is, the world is always coming to an end. All life, including human life, has term limits. The Bible says, "You are dust and to dust you shall return."

It's difficult to admit this. Our culture sometimes calls getting older, THE GOLDEN YEARS. A woman who is almost 90, told me it's the "metallic age," a combination of silver hair, golden teeth and a lead bottom.

Because we live in a youth culture, people don't want to be reminded that you get old and your body begins to fall apart and one day you will die. Older people can make you uncomfortable. They remind you that your own body won't always remain smooth and responsive. The ideal way to age, one person said, would be to become slowly invisible as you grow older, gradually disappearing without causing any discomfort to the young.

It's not easy to face the fact that you won't be as good at whatever it was you used to do. There was a cartoon in the New Yorker magazine that illustrated this. A physician is looking at a chart and says to her elderly patient: "It appears that you will definitely outlive your usefulness." That's something none of us wants to hear. Maybe usefulness is over-rated.

In our materialistic, production oriented culture, there tends to be a utilitarian view of human beings. You are good as long as you are good for something. Happiness is equated with usefulness. However the Christian faith teaches a quite different message. The Bible tells you that you have intrinsic

worth—not measured by your accomplishments, but merely by "being."

The key to success in growing older and to be able to grow old gracefully is to do that without getting bitter. You need to find ways to make your soul grow younger as your body grows older. That's an accomplishment. Finding reasons to hope, not only for yourself, but for the future of others—those who come after you, that's an accomplishment.

There's one verse in that wonderful hymn by Isaac Watts, ***O GOD, OUR HELP IN AGES PAST,*** which is a good reminder that all things go away, "Time, like an ever rolling stream soon bears us all away;

we fly forgotten as a dream fades at the opening day."

We need this reminder because it's so easy to assume that if we do not go on, the world will not go on. But it does. The disciples assumed that if the Temple was gone, God would be gone. The world would end. Not true. Each one of us will have to get out of the way some day and let someone else have a try at it.

Life is terminal. Everything comes to an end—even the Temple of God in Jerusalem. Entropy is as natural as growth and development. Your days are numbered and that's what makes your days mean something. The Psalmist urges you to "Count your

days so that you might gain a wise heart." If you truly count your days then things like petty grudges will mean nothing.

There's also something quite funny about growing older. The only time in your life when you want to be older is when you are a child. Children talk about ages in fractions. "How old are you." "I'm four and a half." Notice that you are never thirty-five and a half. People use different verbs to describe growing older. You *become* 21. But you don't become 30, you *turn* 30. It sounds like bad milk. He turned, so we had to throw him out.

Then you are *pushing* 40; you *reach* 50, and then you *make* it to 60. By then you've built up so much

speed that you *hit* 70, and then as if bewildered, *get into* your 80's. In your 90's you start going backward, "I was just 92." Then the strangest thing of all happens when you reach 100, you become a child again. You say, "I'm a hundred and a half."

The funny thing about growing older is how it surprises you. You'd think it would happen gradually, but it's not that way. I heard someone say, "The funny thing about old age is the way it suddenly sneaks up on you. You wake up and you wonder how you got there."

Lest you misunderstand, Jesus was not saying because all things go away you should not plan and dream and work for the betterment of yourself,

others and the creation. At the same time you need to remember that the whole and final justification for your life and for the whole created order is never to be found within that order itself, but in the never-ending life and love of God who is always creating new beginnings out of endings.

This means also that you are not to be primarily concerned with dates and timetables and predictions. Rather you are to be concerned that you are cooperating with God by being compassionate.

The temples we build will not last forever but that does not mean they should not have been built. Our little worlds are always coming to an end—but

the love of God is forever. Out of the ruins of the tumbling temples of our world and of our lives can rise new beginnings. Amen.