

OK, your RISUS PASCHALIS, your Easter joke. A man and his wife are dining at a table in a plush restaurant, and the husband keeps staring at an old drunken lady swigging her gin as she sits alone at a nearby table, until the wife asks, "Do you know her?"

"Yes," sighs the husband. "She's my ex-wife. She took to drink right after we divorced 7 years ago and I hear she hasn't been sober since." "My goodness," says the wife. "Who would think a person could go on celebrating that long?!"

OK, first some background on this loaded little snippet of John's gospel. Jesus' death is the supreme expression of love for His disciples. "I lay down my life for the sheep" (Jn 10:15). This laying down of life out of love creates a new commandment. The old commandment was most likely the double commandment to love God and neighbor. In that commandment the emphasis is on the human ability to love God and neighbor. But one of the great insights of John's theology is that God first loved us. "We love because He first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). However, this 'first loving' of God is through the human person of Jesus. The first step in the new commandment is to recognize and remember the Son of Man who joins us in our deepest fears and sustains us through our greatest losses.

This new beginning – God loving us through the Word Made Flesh – is a significant psychological shift. James Mackey calls it a 'universal human idiosyncrasy.' He writes: "I simply will not feel my own life, my own self, as grace or gift of God, unless someone values me.....I may see, at first blush, this stands the whole logic of the reign of God on its head.....The logic should surely read: first feel all life and existence as grace, and then feel inspired to be gracious to others.....But most of us can only sense ourselves and our world valued and cherished by God when we feel valued and cherished by others." (JESUS: THE MAN AND THE MYTH, p. 170)

The way we come to know and love the divine is through the human. This is the insight that grounds the new commandment. Therefore, the disciples must always remember the laying down of Jesus' life as simultaneously His act of loving them -- and His revelation of God's love poured out upon us at the cross. If the disciples persevere in this memory, they will enact the same type of love for one another, a love that is grounded in divine love – and reveals divine love. This way of remembering and enacting will become a new form of Jesus' presence among His disciples. So when people see this love the disciples have for one another, they will know the source and energy of that love comes from Jesus. Love will be the tip-off that they are disciples of Jesus. (adapted from Shea, THE RELENTLESS WIDOW, p. 135-137)

Second, it really IS all about love. William Blake wrote, "We are put on earth for a little space that we might learn to bear the beams of love." Isn't that great? "We are put on earth for a little space that we might learn to bear the beams of love."

So let's begin here: what kind of legacy do we hope to leave to those we love and to the world? One of these days we will be leaving this earth. How will people remember us? In what ways will the world be a better place because we've been here?

Stephen Covey in his SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE suggests that we begin with the end in mind. MEMENTO MORI – Remember death – remember that you are going to die – is a huge piece of our theological tradition. It gives us a perspective – and therefore a direction. It's not morbid – it's realistic. If we were to die tomorrow, what would we leave behind? Which of our values would we want to pass on to our heirs? Are we living out those values right now? When we get to the end of our life, will we do so with a lot of

regrets? What will our friends say about us? Our family? Will we have the resources to meet the challenges of our final years, not only financial resources, but emotional resources, relational resources, spiritual resources? Those are big questions. But they must be answered if we are going to have anything close to a successful life.

Author and business guru Peter Drucker says his life was shaped by a teacher who once asked, “What do you want to be remembered for?” Drucker was only 13 when he heard this question, and he really didn’t have an answer.

“I don’t expect you to be able to respond,” the teacher continued. “But if you still can’t answer this question by the time you’re 50, you will have wasted your life.” That was a wise teacher.

Many authors have called this ‘the mid-life evaluation.’ If we are doing it right, we begin to transition from ‘me’ to ‘we’ and from ‘take’ to ‘give.’ That’s a healthy transition. It’s a move from a ‘more-is better’ to a ‘less is better’ worldview.

German psychologist Erik Erikson called this shift the developmental stage of “generativity vs. stagnation.” This is when people become aware of the need to live beyond themselves and begin the difficult task of leading a meaningful and useful life.

Of course, we don’t have to wait until mid-life to adopt this perspective on life. It is the kind of worldview that Jesus encouraged among His followers. What kind of legacy do we hope to leave to those we love and to the world?

In 1962, Clare Boothe Luce, one of the first women to serve in the U.S. Congress, offered some advice to President John F. Kennedy. “A great man,” she told him, “is a sentence.” Abraham Lincoln’s sentence was “He preserved the union and freed the slaves.” Franklin Roosevelt’s sentence was: “He lifted us out of a Great Depression and helped us win a world war.” Luce feared that Kennedy’s attention was so splintered among different priorities that his sentence risked becoming a muddled paragraph.

As we contemplate our purpose for being, our plan for life, begin with the big question: “What’s my sentence?”

Former pro football great Bubba Smith came face-to-face with his sentence many years ago, and he didn’t like it. He played nine years in the pros, was named to 2 Pro Bowls and was a First-Team All-Pro in 1971.

After football, Smith was recruited to appear in commercials for Miller Lite beer. He and fellow NFL veteran Dick Butkus were cast as inept golfers and polo players in the TV spots.

In one of the most memorable ads, Smith recited the virtues of the beer, beaming into the camera, “I also love the easy-opening cans,” while ripping off the top of the can.

But Smith walked away from the job because he didn’t like the effect drinking had on people and he realized that he was contributing to a significant social problem. In a magazine article about his life, Bubba Smith said that neither beer nor any other alcoholic beverage had ever been part of his life. But he advertised Lite beer and felt good about doing it. It was an easy job. It was enjoyable, and it paid a good salary.

Until one day when he went back to Michigan State, his alma mater, as the Grand Marshal of the Homecoming Parade. As he was riding in the limousine at the head of the parade, he heard throngs of people

on both sides of the parade route shouting. One side was shouting, “Tastes great!” and the other side was shouting, “Less filling!” – the slogans Miller Lite used to promote their products. Bubba Smith suddenly realized that he and the beer commercials that he made had had a tremendous impact on the students at Michigan State.

Later, Bubba was in Ft. Lauderdale during Spring Break, and he saw drunken college kids up and down the beaches, shouting “Tastes great! Less filling.” And when it came time to renew his contract, he refused to sign because he said that he didn’t want his life to count for something like that. He said that there was a still, small voice in his mind that kept saying, “Stop, Bubba. Stop.” Bubba Smith didn’t want the sentence he would leave as his legacy to be “Tastes great! Less filling!” So he walked away.

What sentence will one day summarize our life? “She kept a spotless home.” “He loved to shop.” “She wore the cutest outfits.” “He was a great golfer.” All things I’ve heard – and read – in obituaries or reflections offered at funerals. I cringe every time I hear those kinds of things. Was the person’s life that shallow? How about a sentence like, “He or she was a true servant, always happy to help fill in a need.” “He or she was a true follower of Jesus Christ.” “He or she was known for their great love and generosity.” “No one ever encountered them without being left a better person.”

Jesus was addressing people who were considering becoming His disciples. He wanted them to understand what was involved. He didn’t need half-hearted followers. He wanted people who were willing to leave everything they considered important – if that were ever needed – in order to follow Him. Would we measure up to that standard?

I hope we’ve all heard of a remarkable village in southeastern France called La Chambon. What made this village remarkable is that the residents of that village, as a community, risked their lives to protect Jews during World War II. In later years documentaries were made about them; a wonderful book titled *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* was written about them by Philip P. Hallie. But the villagers tended to be irritated by questions that made their risks sound noble or praiseworthy. “What else would you do?” they responded. “You do what needs to be done.”

That would be a good one-sentence legacy: They did what needed to be done.

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once told a moving story shortly after the horror of 9/11. It involved a passenger on United Flight 93, which went down in Pennsylvania. That passenger, Tom Burnett, called his wife from the hijacked plane, having realized by then that 2 other planes had crashed into the World Trade Center.

“I know we’re going to die,” he said. “But some of us are going to do something about it.” And because they did, many other lives were saved.

“I know we’re going to die,” is a wholly unremarkable statement. Each of us here could say the same. But those other words, “Some of us are going to do something about it,” is an inspiring one sentence legacy.

What are we doing about our gift of life? What will our legacy be? What one sentence would we want to define our life? Are we living right now so that the legacy may be achieved? (adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING,