

Sermon for Sunday, September 7, 1975, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"IS THERE LIFE AFTER BIRTH?"  
St. Mark 8:27-38

Text: "What does a man gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his true self?  
What can he give to buy that self back?" --St. Mark 8:36 (N.E.B.)

During the past several days, I have conducted four funerals. Three of them were for members of this congregation. Of the three from our church, all were known to me and one of them was especially dear to me as an Elder of the Session of this church. Last Sunday, after the second service, the Session met in the transept, and Stuart White, one of our Elders, was there. As we chatted with him last Sunday morning, none of us dreamed that this Sunday, he would be forever gone. During the course of the year, Dr. Megahan and I conduct a fairly large number of funerals, and over the years the number of funerals mounts up. Yet, I am sure I speak for both of us when I say that we never grow accustomed to death. Death remains abnormal, death remains unnatural. As I have conducted these funerals in recent days, the question with which I must always deal is this: is there life after death? You see, that is what the resurrection of Jesus is all about. It is a promise to you and me that there will be life after death. The Bible tells us that God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus, alive from the dead, raised from the grave, is God's earnest money, it is God's down-payment, it is God's assurance, it is God's pledge that as He raised Jesus to life from death, so we, too, shall be raised from the dead. That is why Easter has always been so important to us Christians. It means that death doesn't have the last word. It means that the grave is not the end. There is something more. That is why St. Paul could cry out, "O grave, where is thy victory? O, death, where is thy sting?" And then he concludes in triumph, "Thanks be to thee, O God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

In one sense of the word, the whole of the Christian faith hinges on the question of resurrection, of life after death. Therefore, St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sin." And then he goes on to add, "If in the life, we who are in Christ, have only hope, we are of all men most to be pitied." So, God has raised Jesus from the dead as a proof, a testimony, a pledge, an assurance, that we, too, shall be raised. As we come to a funeral, this is the faith we have. It is the faith that death and the grave do not have the last word. The casket has no fear for us because we know that for the man who is in Jesus, there is eternal life.

But that is where the catch comes in. You see, the Bible does not teach us that after death we then have eternal life. I suspect that some of us have a misconception about that. I suspect that some of us think that eternal life begins after we die. Yet that is not the case at all. The Bible teaches us quite clearly that eternal life is something that we acquire here, during our earthly life. That is made quite clear in the third chapter of St. John. There Jesus says, "He who believes in Him (Jesus) is not condemned. He who does not believe is condemned already." That is, if you don't believe in Jesus, you are already dead. You are already condemned because Jesus said, "He has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

So, in one sense, to ask "Is there life after death?" is to ask the wrong question. The real question is "Is there life after birth?" Now that was something that confused Nicodemus. Remember, he came to Jesus by night, and Jesus told him that unless a man was born anew, he could not see the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus was perplexed

by this. "How can a man be born when he is old?" he asked. "Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb?" And the answer is, of course, that a man must be spiritually born. Through Jesus, he must be born into the Kingdom of God, and when that happens, he has--that instant--eternal life.

That's what St. Paul means when he writes, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, He is a new creation." You have passed from death to life. You are a new creation. St. Paul says, "The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come." So, to be spiritually born, to believe in Jesus must happen in this life. After death, there is no eternal life. After death, it is too late to believe in Jesus. It must happen in this life. If a man is not already in Jesus, after death there is no eternal life. In that sense, we would answer the question, "Is there life after death?" by saying "No, no." Either this new life, this eternal life is something that happens before we die, or it doesn't happen.

So, the real question that faces us today is our sermon topic for this morning: "Is there life after birth?" Let me share with you what the Bible says about you and me. The Bible says that God created us and He made us after His own image, and of all creation, you and I are the only ones who have a capacity for God--only you and I were made for fellowship with Him, and God made us real persons. We are not robots. We are not automatons. We don't automatically have to love God. God ran a high risk--He gave us freedom to love Him or to say "No" to Him; to respond in loving obedience or to turn our backs on Him in rebellion. Only that way could I really love God. If I'm not free to say "No" then my "Yes" means nothing. God ran a risk in His creation. He gave me the capacity to say "No" to Him. You know what happened. Mankind turned his back on God. He responded in rebellion and disobedience. He said "No" to God, and when he did that, he broke fellowship. He ruptured his relationship to God; he created a chasm between himself and his maker. When he did that, brokenness entered into every area of his life. For example, take man's mental, emotional life. When he broke fellowship with God, the Bible says that God came to the garden looking for Adam to fellowship with Him. Adam was hiding, and God said "Adam, where are you?" He said, "I am hiding." "Why are you hiding from me?" asked God. "Because," said Adam, "I saw that I was naked and I was afraid." Fear, anxiety--the basis of emotional, mental disturbances--entered into the experience of man. Brokenness became a part of this phase, this facet, of his life.

Or look at the social area of our experience. The first thing that happened after man broke fellowship with God was that one brother killed another. This inhumanity of man towards man, this maltreatment and hatred and killing and abusing of one another has spilled over into every area of our social life. The Bible is replete with man's inhumanity to man from that point on. Brokenness in our social life.

In man's physical life, brokenness and death came, for when he rebelled against God and broke fellowship, the Bible says, "Man became subject to death"--physical death. He became subject to illness and disease and pain and suffering and, like the rest of off creation, to physical death.

But worst of all, man knew spiritual death, for he was pulled apart in the spiritual area of his life from his creator, and there existed this alienation in every part of man's life. You can call it depravity, you can call it original sin, you can call it separation or alienation from God, but whatever you call it, it is still death--death in every part of our being.

But the exciting and wonderful thing is that God never quit loving rebellious, sinful man. Man must bear the consequence and the punishment for his sin, but God's heart never stopped loving him. God reached out to us in our lostness, in our alienation and separation--He reached out to us to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. God came in the person of Jesus. You and I must be punished for our sin and our alienation but Jesus, upon the cross, bore that sin for us.

Death was due us, but He died for us. God said to us, "If you will accept it, (that is, your death) done for you, your sins are paid for in the blood of Jesus, you are forgiven. I raised my son from death to life and I promise you I will give you eternal life. If you receive Him, you will know what it is to be forgiven. You will know what it is to have eternal life--you will know what it is to be born again. The alienation and separation shall be healed. You shall be whole again." Incredible! The incredible love of God for people like you and me.

And so, as a man receives Jesus, he accepts Him as His saviour and he is given eternal life. In his play Hamlet, Shakespeare asks a profound question about life. As Hamlet returns to Denmark from exile, he happens to come upon the grave digger who is digging a grave and in the process throws up the skull of the court jester of Hamlet's youth. Hamlet feels the shock of mortality. What has this crumbling skull to do with the man he knew and loved? From the court jester his thoughts moved to the great men of the past. "Could it be that mighty Caesar, once held up by all the world, has become a lump of common clay that some man has used to mend a hole in the wall of his house?" This is no mere speculation about chemical changes in bodies; Hamlet is asking a profound question about the worth of life. The worth of life of a Caesar or a friend or for himself. What is the worth of life? Is it worth anything? Is there life after birth?

To that question, Jesus answered, "Whoever cares for his own safety is lost, but if a man will let himself be lost for my sake and for the gospel, that man is safe." "What does a man gain " he asks, "by gaining the whole world at the cost of his true self? What can he give to buy that self back?"

Are there those of us this morning who are gaining the world and in the process are losing our true selves? Can we buy that stuff back? Only if we accept Jesus as our Saviour. Only if we invite him into our hearts, hand over our life to his control. This week, or next, or the week after that, there will be another funeral from Central Church. Could it be mine? Could it be yours? Which of our Elders dreamed last week as we met together, that one of us in there would not be here this Sunday? When the time comes for me or for you, as it inevitably will, will there be life after death? No, not unless there has first been life after birth. Not unless we have accepted Jesus as our Saviour--and if we have, we will already have eternal life. Jesus once said, "Anyone who gives heed to what I say and puts his trust in Him who sent me, has hold of eternal life." He has already passed from death to life.

Jesus said that He has come that men--you and I--might have life. How about you? Do you have life after birth?

But the exciting and wonderful thing is that God never quit loving rebellious, sinful man. Man must bear the consequences and the punishment for his sin, but God's heart never stopped loving him. God reached out to us in our loneliness, in our alienation and separation--he reached out to us to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. God came in the person of Jesus. You and I must be crucified for our sin and our alienation but Jesus, upon the cross, bore that sin for us.

Death was due us, but He died for us. God said to us, "If you will accept it (that is, your death) done for you, your sin was paid for in the blood of Jesus, you are forgiven. I raised my son from death to life and I promise you I will give you eternal life. If you receive Him, you will know what it is to be forgiven. You will know what it is to have eternal life--you will know what it is to be born again. The alienation and separation shall be healed. You shall be whole again." Incredibly, "the incredible love of God for people like you and me."

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To that question, Jesus answered, "Whoever comes for his own safety is lost, but if a man will let himself be lost for my sake and for the gospel, that man is safe." "What does a man gain?" he asked, "by saving the whole world at the cost of his life?" Well, what can he give to buy that self again?

And there those of us this morning who are gazing the world and in the process are losing our true selves? Can we buy that stuff back? Only if we accept Jesus as our Savior. Only if we invite him into our hearts, hand over our life to his control. This week, or next, or the week after that, there will be another funeral from Central Church. Could it be mine? Could it be yours? Which of our children dreamed last week as we met together, that one of us in there would not be here this Sunday? When the time comes for me or for you, as it inevitably will, will there be life after death? No, not unless there has first been life after death. For unless we have accepted Jesus as our Savior--and if we have, we will already have eternal life. Jesus once said, "Anyone who gives up what I say and puts his trust in Him who sent me, has hold of eternal life. He has already passed from death to life."

Jesus said that He has come that you--you and I--might have life. Now about you? Do you have life after death?