

Romans 6:12-23

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 10:40-42

‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.’

Dying to Live
Rev. Charles Schuster
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Garrison Keillor has some observations about us. It is his sense that Methodists are excessively calm, maybe bland, that we fear being offensive, and that we lack speed, and that we have a secret fondness for macaroni and cheese. He goes on to say that if you’re dying, Methodists will comfort you. If you’re lonely, we will talk to you, and if you’re hungry we will give you a tuna casserole. We believe in prayer, just don’t ask us to pray out loud. And we believe in miracles, and even expect miracles, especially during stewardship campaigns, and when the offering plates are passed. We believe our pastors will visit us in the hospital, even when we haven’t told our pastors that we’re in the

hospital, because we think our pastors are psychic. We are generous. We will pay up to a dollar for a meal at the church, and drink coffee as if it were the third sacrament, and Methodists will put doughnuts as a line item in the church budget, which we have. And you know you're a Methodist when it takes at least ten minutes to say goodbye. I don't get that one.

All this is true, and it's easy to become targets for comedians, but when I think of our church and what has happened the last three months...I think, for example, of the class we had, the adult class that studied the Middle East. The result of that class was a petition that went to our Annual Conference and was passed. The petition simply states that there ought to be, in a church, an avenue, a way, in which people of different faith traditions can discuss important things with each other in an atmosphere that is safe and respectful. I think about our church and the authors of *The Faith Club*, the Muslim, the Jewish, the Christian women who wrote the book, trying to show people of faith that we can come to love and respect each other though there are extremists in every religion, that we can trust each other, and the authors of *The Faith Club* made it clear in their book. And they will be here at our church in November. I'm proud of that.

I think at General Conference, when the general church, the whole church raised half a million dollars, all the delegates there, for the Nothing but Nets program, and two weeks ago at our Annual Conference, raising \$76,000 for the Nothing but Nets program in honor of Bishop Warner Brown, those nets will go to Angola, which is part of the relationship our conference has, and Bill Gates donating five million dollars for the Nothing but Nets program, we are saving lives, we are stopping the spread of malaria. And today we take up an offering to stop the spread of HIV AIDS in the world. I think of how our church has decided that we will dedicate the next four years, the denomination, to do something to stop the killer diseases in the world, AIDS and malaria, with education and a willingness to remove the conspiracy of silence. AIDS and malaria can be defeated. We will be saving lives. Methodists are saving lives, and we can be proud to be Methodists, United Methodists. We can be proud of that fact.

But it's more than the good we do, it's also why we do it. It's more than our way of acting, it's also our way of being. See, it's about the way we live, and the zest we have for being alive. It's the way we face death, and the honesty we have for the fact that our short time on earth is brief. Methodists are not afraid of death, are not afraid to die, nor to talk about it. Some of us have a clear sense that death is not the end of life, but the beginning of eternal life, as Paul the apostle said. But we count our days, our time on earth, as brief, and we know it. Some of us have lots of questions about what happens after we die, but we come to think that whatever happens, God is with us, and we can trust the future, whatever it is. But we know that death is part of life. We live to die, and it's okay. We're not afraid of death.

I'm proud to be a United Methodist, a Christian believer who has learned to count my days, however many or few. There's an honesty and trust. We number our days. We seek to get a heart of wisdom, and face the truth. We live, we die. We will not live forever. That is the truth, and we know it. Albert Schweitzer was right when he said, "Truth,

however disenchanting, is better than falsehood, however comforting.” We face the fact of death, and are aware that we are living to die. We do not deny the fact of death, we face it, and we become able to live with intensity because of it. We count our days. Our days mean something.

While we were flying to Italy for this wedding, my sister’s son was married to an Italian woman and we were flying to Northern Italy, an eight-hour marathon flight, before they put on the first of three movies on the randomly displayed screens in the aircraft, they served us dinner. They came to the row where we were sitting and the flight attendant said, “Would you like the chicken cacciatore or the Mexican chicken parmesan? And I said to her, “Which of the two do you recommend?” And she looked at me with a look that I’ve seen before at the church, and frankly, even at home. It was a look of complete disbelief, a kind of incredulous stare. It was as if something had been said that no-one ever dared put words to. And she said to me in a voice that was absolutely flat, “Look mister, what can I tell you? It’s airplane food, okay? It is what it is.” I selected the Mexican chicken parmesan that looked an awful lot like the chicken cacciatore sitting on the tray beside me.

It is what it is. It is the truth, and we know it. We live to die. We count our days. We’re born to die. It’s the truth. It’s not a morbid thought, either. It’s not a discouraging thing. It’s Biblical. In Ecclesiastes, we’re told, there’s a time to live and there’s a time to die, and there’s a time for every season under heaven. Every matter. In the 90th Psalm, we’re told that, “Lord, you’ve been our dwelling place in all generations. A thousand years in your sight is but yesterday.” We are like a watch in the night, a dream. We are like grass that is renewed in the morning, and then in the evening it fades and withers. We’re like grass. We fade and wither. It’s okay. Even Jesus was aware of this fact. He told his disciples that he must suffer, and he must die, and they said to him, “This can’t happen to you.”

While we were in Milan, we had a chance to see Leonardo’s “Last Supper.” It’s one of the most famous paintings, one of the most recognizable, and we’re standing in front of the painting and I notice something over on the right side, I never saw this before, but the disciple over on the right side is bald. I felt included, and so have several others, now that they’ve seen it, feel included. I was telling this to the Mens’ Bible Study this past Friday and they said, “Chuck, you were looking over on the right side, you should be looking in the middle, where Jesus is.” Of course they’re right, but when you look in the center of the “Last Supper” by DaVinci, it looks like somebody has put in a door. Some idiot priest, I don’t know, some monk, some trustees chair decided, “Okay, Herb, let’s cut a door in that wall.” And they did. It was a colossal blunder, and the church tried to plaster it up and to make it look like an arch. You can see it there. It’s bigger than it looks there, because it doesn’t go clear to the floor. A door, cut in the “Last Supper.” Somebody should have been fired. Probably somebody was. The interesting thing is, I also learned that when they tried to make that arch, they painted over Jesus’ feet. DaVinci had put his feet there, and intentionally made his feet crossed, trying to communicate the fact that Jesus, at the Last Supper, was headed for the cross. That’s the point.

Leonard Sweet likes to tell the story about the man who went to his doctor for a checkup and the doctor finally emerged to tell him the bad news. “You have a short time to live.” “How long?” The doctor said, “Ten.” “Ten what? Ten years? Ten months? Ten weeks? Ten days?” And the doctor replied, “Nine, eight, seven...” I almost didn’t put that in. It’s tacky. We count our days. We are living to die, and that means there is an intensity brought to life. Time is brief. Don Messer is a good friend of mine. Until eight years ago he was president of Iliff School of Theology. He is a noted author, an excellent preacher. We’ve had him here, you’ve heard him. He’s been an important voice for social justice issues in the United Methodist Church way beyond the local churches. He’s been a candidate for bishop three times, we should have elected him, he would have been good. Eight years ago he was fired by the Board of Trustees at the Iliff School of Theology. In my opinion, that was a very sad thing. I think it was unfair, and we all wondered what would happen to Don, because sometimes that destroys people.

But Don and Bonnie got involved in helping combat the AIDS epidemic, they surrounded themselves with the fact of death, they did, that people dying of AIDS, he has single-handedly awakened our church and our denomination to the problem of the pain of HIV AIDS. Don and Bonnie have learned in their recent years how precious life is, they count their days and they walk the floors of a hospital filled with people who are dying and they look in to the faces of these people and every now and then there’s a glimpse of joy in the midst of such stark sadness. To meet a mother who is near death, whose only concern is for her children. Don has had a wonderful career, a wonderful life, he has accomplished things that most people don’t even think about. He told me about ten days ago, he said, “Chuck, I have to say this – the last eight years of my life have been the best.” He counts his days. Instead of letting the weeks flow from season to season when summer drifts into fall. We wake up every morning grateful for another day and we go to bed every night anticipating what tomorrow will bring. Instead of taking life for granted and facing the future with an attitude of privileged presumption, we count our days, happy for the little things. The intensity of life means things we think are big are not. What people think of us matters not so much as who we are. How much we make for a living matters not so much as what we do with what we have, and how high we climb on a ladder of some career matters not as much as what we elevate in the values we believe in on our journey. It’s the truth, and we know the truth, and we do not hide from the truth. We’re living to die, and there’s an intensity because of that. We savor each moment, we flavor each episode, and we favor all the people we meet because they’re sacred. They are. There’s an intensity to life. It’s a fact. We count our days.

One other thing. It’s not just a matter of fact and truth. Not just a matter of fact and truth, it’s also a matter of faith in God. Not just to count our days, but to make our days count. Not just the intensity of life, but the quality of living. We’re dying to live, we’re just dying to live. We’re trying to do something beyond ourselves. Life is more than the sum of moments, it’s how we fill those moments. Paul the apostle dying to live, he tells us, “Yield yourself to God as men and women who have been brought from death to life.” Make your days count. And Jesus urged his followers, “Whoever gives one of the little ones a cup of cold water, the little ones, are treated as if they are disciples, when you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me.” Make your days count.

When we were at Annual Conference, the annual meeting of United Methodists in this area, it began, it was in Denver, it began with a worship service that lasted two and a half hours. And the preacher was a bishop named Schol, from the Baltimore area, who preach 55 minutes and 10 seconds. I timed him. The service was inspirational, the first twenty minutes of it. The sermon was incredible, the first fifteen minutes of it. Most of us were looking at our watches for the second hour, and some of us pulled out our calendars the last thirty minutes. That's the way it began. The end of the Annual Conference meeting was the ordination service in which Reverend Kershaw was named and hooded and touched and blessed and ordained. I said this at the party they had here last Sunday night, before he and the others were ordained, they had to come and sit down in a chair and our bishop Warner Brown got on his knees and washed their feet. While the bishop was washing their feet, he spoke to each of the women and men being ordained and I can read lips and so from the last row in the hall I'm pretty sure I saw Bishop Brown say to Joel, "Is it true that the diploma that you have is larger than the diplomas of the other four clergy on the staff?" I'm pretty sure that he said that. And then in reading the lips, I'm pretty sure I saw Joel saying to Bishop Brown what only a newly ordained Elder can say to his or her bishop. I'm sure that he said, "Bishop, you missed a toe." Joel denies it. He says the conversation between the Bishop and himself is private. He wouldn't tell me anything about it, but it was a rich moment. It was something he will never forget. Made me think of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Made me realize that our task in life is to be servants to each other and to make each day count. Dying to live, living to serve, it's the faith of it, making our days count.

There was a student at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Professor Fred Craddock, she was a student of his, he's was the one who was so impressed, inspired by this. One of his students taught him what faith is. A young man in his early twenties was dying of that horrible, horrible, frightening, terrible AIDS disease, was in a hospital. The young man had no church. His parents belonged to a church and asked the pastor of the church to go over to the hospice for an obligatory visit, which is what it was, because when this pastor, a veteran pastor, looked in the room and saw how sick, he thought about the fear of his own death, he thought about all they myths and inaccuracies that surround the disease AIDS and he opened the door and he yelled in a prayer and left. One of the nurses saw this and called the seminary and asked if the students could go see the young man. A first-year student, not even an elder, by the way, went over to the hospital. The young man was still alive, but barely. She went into the room, she went over to his bed, she pulled up a chair, she lifted his head and cradled his head in her arms, and she sang and quoted Scripture and she prayed, and she sang some more and quoted some more Scripture and she prayed, and then the young man died. Some of her classmates said to her, "How did you know what to do? Weren't you afraid? Why did you do it?" And she looked at her friends and she said, "I imagined, what if Jesus had gotten that call. What would he have done? I had to go. I suppose you could say that my goal, my chief ambition would be not just to be a good person or a good pastor, but to be a Christian."

What can we do to make our days count? This week we learned of the death of George Carlin. I, from time to time, have quoted George Carlin. Eyebrows go up when I do this,

because George Carlin sets the bounds of good taste and then crosses them. But I think one of the most profound things he said was something he said after his wife died, and it's been fairly recent, he said, "The paradox of our time in history is that we have taller buildings but shorter tempers, wider freeways but narrower viewpoints, we spend more but have less, we buy more but enjoy less, we have bigger houses and smaller families, we have more conveniences but less time, we have more degrees but less good sense, more knowledge but less judgment, more experts yet more problems, more medicine but less wellness." And then he said, "Remember, spend some time with the people you love, because you may not have them around forever. And remember, say a kind word to someone who looks up to you with a sense of awe, because that little person may soon grow up and leave your side. Give time to love," he said, "give time to speak. Give time to share the precious thoughts in your minds and listen." And he said, "Always remember, life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away." Make the days count. We're dying to live.

I saw a bumper sticker in downtown Fort Collins that says – the car was not one of these late-model cars, it was old, it traveled many miles as I think had its owner. It could have used a new paint job, or at least a trip down to the car wash. But the bumper fit, I think, the character of the car and, I would guess, the character of the owner. It said, "I am becoming an old woman with no regrets." Perhaps that's the goal we seek as Methodists who have come to think that coffee is a sacrament, and doughnuts ought to be a line item in our budget. As Methodists we have faith in God, faith in ourselves, we believe that when there's a problem, we have a solution with God's help. And when there's an illness, it is our job to bring healing, with God's grace. And when there is incompleteness in the world, we can visualize some degree of perfection and how we might even move toward it, because we're Methodists. Facing the fact of death, we count our days, knowing that we're going to die, but living to die, and having faith in God to make our days count, because we're dying to live. And to bring hope to those who are dying. And this day, to bring hope to those who are dying before their time of AIDS. Its just what Methodists are supposed to do.