

“Faith For Life ...and For Death”
II Corinthians 4:13 — 5:1
First Presbyterian Church

Reverend Kent Kinney
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Lord God, your constant love of the human family has been handed in human words to us. In this way you are our God and heavenly Father. We pray that we may eagerly listen to the words of your Gospel, and in this way be with you, heart and soul, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This Memorial Day weekend is very special to Americans. It is a time to enjoy friends and family; to celebrate the personal contributions of many persons over the years to our individual lives and to our American nation. We remember people who have given their best to build our nation’s political and religious freedom and to create opportunities for all Americans to enjoy a good life.

This weekend is also a special time to remember persons of faith who have shared with us their experience with God in Jesus Christ. Yes, we remember persons who are no longer in this world but are now in God’s nearer presence.

The words I would share describe faith for life... and for death. Now the members of Alcoholics Anonymous begin their meetings by sharing with each other where they are in life. Having seen the folly of deceiving others and themselves they come clean. “My name is John and I am an alcoholic,” they say, one after the other.

We would do well to be as honest. My name is Kent and I am a terminal man. Like all of you, I am dying.

That is where the apostle Paul begins with the clear assumption that however different we may be, our humanity runs irreversibly toward our common final destination ——— death. “Our outer nature is wasting away,” Paul wrote (II Corinthians 4:16). No need kidding ourselves. We may be getting better, but we’re certainly growing older. And if something more drastic doesn’t call a halt to our living, then the actuary tables will.

Agreeing to the fact that we are dying, what do we say of life . . . before death and after?

Whatever we say, IF we are faithful to the Scriptures, we must speak of life . . . both before death and after. For some time now, Christians have experienced debate between those who contend for life in this world only and those persons who contend for life solely after death.

On the one hand, there are those for whom life is passing by because they are waiting for the next world. Waiting until they can get out of this congested no—man’s land of suburban boarding and urban working. Some are waiting for the second coming of the good old days of Christ. Some people think nothing matters except where you spend

eternity, and don't have the foggiest notion that the answer is related to how one does your living and dying here and now.

Not knowing how to live now, they want to be assured by the talk of "the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell." Resigned to a low quality existence in this world, they confine eternity to the future. Having heard no more than half of what Jesus said, they translate eternal life in quantitative terms. Unable or unwilling to come to terms with the facts of daily living, much less the principalities and powers, of this world, they leave all the political stuff to the devil, as though God doesn't care about the way people live their lives in the "here and now." Some are unable to live now because they are waiting for life to come later.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the room are those who say it's all o pipe dream, wishful thinking, a cop-out, immature, an illusionary pie in the sky by and by.

I think that if a person has a biblical understanding of life, neither of these approaches to life is accurate. The Old Testament, in its limited view of God, sometimes concludes that this is it . . . what you see is what you get, and life is this world . . . only. Yet within the Old Testament there are signals of more of God's word to come. The New Testament witnesses to the reality of a hope that transcends this world . . . an insistent affirmation that death means we've only just begun.

The NEW TESTAMENT insists on life . . . before death AND after. Death confronts us with the reality of finitude. It is important to recognize human life is limited in years. But to accept that does not diminish the value of life, it enhances it. Otherwise, with the illusion of immortality, we would think we could postpone and procrastinate and get away from death altogether.

We are inclined to spend life in the way you use an "economy size" tube of toothpaste . . . wasting giant chunks because we're sure there is a lifetime supply in that firm, full tube. Have you noticed how the last two inches seem to last as long as the first six? With six down and two to go we suddenly realize that we're going to run out. Thus we use with care the remaining inches.

Biblical faith insists that we come to terms with the shortness of life by living wisely. The awareness of our limited time points us to "look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." (II Corinthians 4:18)

Facing the reality of death we are blessed by the opportunity to come to terms with the meaning of life. Death has a way of sorting and sifting our values. For some of us, it means "getting with it." Life is too brief and too beautiful to slide through, doing whatever comes along. For others, it means slowing down and taking time to smell the roses. It means getting rid of much that once seemed so important, but when measured in "life" and "death" terms, seems so unnecessary. In either

case, it is a beautiful and painful thing to face up to the reality of death and the meaning of life and then to re-order one's priorities accordingly.

Aware of limited years, and committed to that which is eternal, we can live with resilience and flexibility, whatever is ahead. The apostle Paul asserts:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed . . . for while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. (II Corinthians 4:8-12)

Death points us to a hope beyond death. No matter how farsighted and careful you are with toothpaste, it finally runs out. You may make sure this tube goes twice as far as the last one or three times longer than your neighbor does, but finally there is no more. And there are still teeth to be brushed. Whether 70 or 80 or 90 years comprise your life, there is always so much to be done; that is, if you live for anything worthwhile there is so much remaining.

I heard this definition of the word "saint." "What makes a saint a saint is that he outlives his body." How beautiful it is when a person plants trees whose shade he may never enjoy, when a person lives and contributes something which outlasts him or her.

If we are living for that which is unseen and eternal we do not lose heart. We live and work and die in the confidence that the work of our hands has been established by God and will endure beyond our death.

On this Sunday before Memorial Day, we are brought closer to the meaning of the affirmation of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the communion of saints." It flows into an affirmation of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting . . . all of which is rooted and grounded in the initial assertion, "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth." No wonder we believe in the life everlasting. It is simply the affirmation that the One who was present in the beginning of the creation, will be present at the end; that the One who breathed life into human life will bring to these bodies of death, a resurrection into the life everlasting; that the God who gives life before death promises in Jesus Christ to give us life after death.

We believe in life everlasting! Meanwhile, there is life abundant. So much to do and share, so we do not lose heart.

O God, we are the work of your hands. You, Lord, have made us and love us. All our life is your gift, all your power was in our creation and thus you go on giving to us grace upon grace. What more need we hope for from you? This certainty, God, is good enough for us. Amen.