

First of all, I need to say that I'm glad the world didn't end yesterday, so I get a chance to preach on these lessons... They're some of my favorites.

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."

We hear that a lot at burials.

Yesterday and last night, my mind kept returning to a burial I did many years ago in New England. I knew I was going to have to at least share it with you.

It was a graveside service, set at 4:00 on a Saturday, an hour before my normal Saturday night Eucharist. And while probably manageable time-wise, I went ahead and got one of my retired priests to take the Saturday service. It was for a family I had never met, and it was with a funeral director that I had never worked with because he was new to the business.

I showed up at 3:50 for this event. And there was the funeral director anxiously pacing back and forth with eight chairs lined up in front of a large headstone, a spray of flowers, and the cremated remains of this person. Looking at the burial record, I noted that the man I was burying had two sons, seven grandchildren and was the founder of a rope and belt supply company.

Nobody else was there. Just me and this very nervous funeral director and, of course, the person we were about to bury. At 3:55 we started looking at our watches. At 4:00 we began to wonder if we had gotten the time right. At 4:10, my rookie funeral director began to fret about what to do if the family didn't show. I told him not to worry, we had all the people we needed to do a burial and the guy wasn't going anywhere. But somehow that didn't seem to comfort him.

By 4:20 the funeral director was really freaking out, and I was congratulating myself that I had arranged to have backup for the Saturday service. At 4:30 the family rolled in, apologized for being tardy, I did the committal and asked if anyone wanted to make any comment. And one of the sons said, "Well, he sold a lot of rope in his day." Then we all left.

There's an epitaph from a sixteenth century tombstone somewhere in Scotland

"Born a man... Died a greengrocer."

Everybody has his or her own private visions they carry with them about the meaning of their lives, and I think everyone also has their own little capsule pictures of life's failure they carry with them as well. That epitaph is my personal vision of life's failure. It's always stuck with me, and it crops up when I think about the meaning of my life or the meaning of someone else's' life -- which of course naturally gets me thinking about the meaning of my own.

And the reason it cropped up for me yesterday, is that Mary Etta and I rode our motorcycles over to Hood River to visit, do a babysitting job for grandkids, and to visit my parents. My dad recently turned 93 and still has all these projects in the works, along with his garden and it's always a treat to see him happy and busy. I was thinking about all the things he means to me and has been to me, and In my own weird way, I'm hoping that I can pull off the same kind of life he has, and of course, out there in my interior landscape is that epitaph, which waits for me if I forget my identity and the purpose of my life...

Well, that may or may not make sense to you, but I thought I'd share it with you, as the letter from Peter today, opens up some major questions of identity and purpose.

We were created in the image of God, but something has gone wrong. Like a mirror with a crack in it, we give back an image that is badly distorted. The story of Adam is the story of each of us. We were created to love and serve God and each other, but somehow we've chosen to serve ourselves as God instead, and this means that we live lives which are distorted from what they were intended to be.

Born a man -- died a greengrocer...

All the great religions of the world embody this truth in their myths and their histories, and I believe our own experience of ourselves bears that out too...

Yet as we listen to the accounts and the words of Jesus, and we compare them to our own inner feelings about life, we recognize the model of what we were intended to be as human beings. And somehow, in a way that we can't define clearly, we move toward him.

Peter knew that: *"Come to him, to that living stone rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a royal priesthood..."*

"A royal priesthood," Peter tells us, born and baptized to carry out Jesus mission here in this world, to be his hands and feet to serve the world. *"A chosen race"*, he says, set apart to tell the world of God's mighty acts, through Jesus.

I think we are drawn toward this person Jesus of Nazareth because we sense in him that there is a power to turn greengrocers into men... to restore our humanity if you will... we are drawn toward this person Jesus of Nazareth because we sense in him that there is a power to give life and joy to all who follow him. I believe that when he says, *"Follow me"* that he has the power to give us ourselves, or to help us find our real selves. I believe that somehow in our following him, and seeking this Son of Man, or Son of God that we learn what our names really are: God's sons and daughters -- brothers and sisters to one another -- and as we share our experience of God that comes out of that kind of fellowship, in some sense, (like First Peter says,) we really are, or we really do become, a royal priesthood.

And I think it's hard not to be somehow smug about that -- in our worst moments.

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my fathers place there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"

And Thomas said, *"How can we know the way, Lord? Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."*

And Jesus said, *"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the father but through me."* **One of the core identity statements of the Christian faith and life.**

Many are uncomfortable with this claim of Jesus. Maybe not the claim itself, because we as a community know about that, but rather the exclusivity it conveys. I've seen that aspect of being exclusive -- or being somehow the only way -- played up sometimes to the point of being offensive -- even to the most devout Christians.

But that's what we have.

I know I occasionally get approached or perhaps re-preached about that statement of the faith and I always respond with the statement that it's the only way I know. I continue on to explain that for those of us who are a part of it, the Christian faith has formed the basis for our lives, our culture and our history. And I'm simply not wise enough to figure out another way, so I live in the way that we have been given. And when I'm pressed about Jesus being the **only** way to salvation, I simply restate the obvious: It's the only way **I** know. I also add that I am simply not competent to make a faith statement for anyone else but myself, anyway. And for those of us who sit here, it's the only way **WE** know – and that is not an exclusive statement – that is not a judgment about others whose path of faith differs from our own – but simply a statement about our own faith - which, of course, is the only faith we're really entitled to talk about. And of course, it's not all that exclusive, because God offers it freely to all.

And for us, Jesus **is** the way the truth and the life, which people point to and draw strength and hope from. Jesus **is** God's promise to us that what we see on the evening news is not all there is to our existence -- that our lives have meaning apart from the circumstances we find ourselves in, and finally that regardless of what happens, in our future, there **is** a place for us – (*among who knows how many other places*) - that God in Christ has prepared for us.

And armed with that knowledge -- and with a profound sense of humility -- we can share the hope that is in us with a world the desperately needs it.

In the name of our risen Savior

Jesus Christ,

Amen