



What Do You Want Your Life To Stand For?



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
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An audio version of this sermon is available at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/2015-10-18-AWW.mp3>.

The Opportunities of Obstacles

Luke 15:11-32

The Rev. Andrew W. Walter
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Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two son."

Luke 15:11

Two weeks ago, I stumbled upon an article by a man who described himself as a financial theologian.¹ His identifying himself that way immediately grabbed my attention because I worked in finance before getting ordained, so I have an interest in money and theology, and yet, I never heard of such a thing. "What in the world is a financial theologian?" I wondered.

It turns out a financial theologian is somewhat of a cross between a life coach and a financial planner. The author meets with people, for several sessions over a period of months, and asks them to articulate what matters most in their life, their values, their relationships, their aspirations, their faith really, and then, he helps bring their finances into line with what they say. His whole goal is to work with people so their entire life, everything about them, including how they spend their money, makes a consistent statement about what they believe in, what they are committed to, what they want their life to stand for.

When he meets with an individual or family for the first time, this financial theologian always asks the same three questions, and I want to share them with all of you this morning, asking you to consider how you would respond:

First, if you had all the money you wanted, what would you do?

Second, if you had 10 more years to live, how would you devote the time?

And, finally, if you were to die tonight, at midnight tonight, what would be your biggest regrets?

Those are big, powerful questions, and as you continue to think about them, they may stir up some emotions in you. The financial theologian says they often bring people to tears, which may seem surprising but probably should not be, because research shows many of us are not as happy as we appear on the surface. Our lives are not what we hope they would be. We are not making the most of the time God has given us. And, all of us have regrets, things done and left undone, omissions and missed opportunities, things we would like to take back but can't.

In many ways, we are like the characters in today's Gospel story. As Jesus said, "There was a

¹ Richard Schaper. www.episcopalcafe.com, October 4, 2015.

man who had two sons.” The younger son was brash and self-confident, believing he had life all figured out, as compared to his father who, like so many parents, apparently knew nothing about nothing. The younger son took what was his; and, set off for a distant land; but, it was not long before he hit bottom. He squandered all of his property away, but more importantly, he squandered his life away. He had no meaning, no purpose, nothing to which he could devote his life, and so, he was lost and alone, like a man drowning out at sea.

Regretting his actions, the younger son planned to make amends. He would go back home and spend the rest of his life working for this father, doing whatever needed to be done – big jobs, little jobs, whatever he was told to do – and with that decision, there was a renewed sense of life in him. Suddenly, he had a focus, a plan, something positive to do, something to contribute to the world, and because of that, his life was looking up.

Meanwhile, the older son was still at home, working dutifully for his father, doing exactly what he was supposed to be doing. On the surface, everything was fine, but underneath, there was a growing discontent. While he did what was expected, it was not what he wanted to do. He had other dreams, other goals, things he wanted to do for himself, and when his younger brother returned, the older son’s pent-up emotions burst out. He was angry and bitter. He may have stayed with his father, but on the inside, he had wandered far from home. He resented his father and resented staying home. In truth, the older son was just as lost as his brother was, maybe even more so, for it would be a long, hard road home from his place of anger and unhappiness.

Then, of course, there was the father. The joy he felt at his son’s return masked the pain that had gone before. He didn’t want his younger son to leave. He knew it was a mistake, but sometimes loving our children means letting them go and letting them learn on their own. So that is what the father did, despite all the tears that it caused, despite the empty void it created.²

The father loved his boys, both of his boys, and even though he experienced some disappointment and heartache, as all parents do, deep down, he felt peace and contentment because he knew what his life was about. He knew what gave his life significance and direction. It was his children. It was always his children and always would be his children, and it was his love for them, his devotion to them, that prompted everything the father said and everything the father did.

Yes, there is a little bit of these characters in all of us. We all go through periods of life where we act like the younger son, or the older son. There are times when we wander away and find ourselves far from home; times when we get lost, not knowing what to do, and we drift through life without any direction, squandering what God has given us.

But hopefully, at some point in our life, we end up in a place like the father, where we realize our life’s meaning and purpose. We understand why God created us, why God put us here on earth,

² Henri Nouwen, *Return of the Prodigal Son*

and then, we are willing to give everything we have, every ounce of our being, even if it hurts, to see that purpose through and succeed.

Jesus found that place. He lived there everyday of his life. Jesus came to show us the way to God, to reconcile us to God. As the Bible says: *God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*³ And, Jesus, himself, told his disciples: *I am the way and the truth and the life.*

Jesus came to bring us home, and he gave everything he had, every fiber of his being, right down to his very last breath to see that happen, because he believed in us and was committed to us and he loved us. He loved us more than he loved himself. He loved us more than life itself. That is what he stood for and that is what he died for.

What do you want your life to stand for?

Five years ago, my wife and I came to Grace Church because we experienced the love of God here, in this place, in a way we had not experienced anywhere else. There is no other church like Grace Church. This is not just a good church. This is not a great church. This is an incredible church! Just look around. Every single day, we are offered a glimpse of the kingdom of God, and in our busy, hectic, “I don’t have time to sit down and just think,” world, people want that, and people need that. Here at Grace, we pray for people, and we care for people. We do the work of Jesus and help people find their way to God. We help them find their way home.

That is why my wife and I are here, and that is why we give, more and more each year. We want to make a consistent statement about what we believe in, what we are committed to and what we want our lives to stand for. For us, it is the love of God found in Jesus, and it is this place.

Amen.

³ John 3:16

