

**“IF I HAD MY LIFE TO LIVE OVER . . . “**

*a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on May 13, 2018  
based on John 10:11-18*

The Nobel prize winning author, Isaac Singer liked to tell the following story he claimed was true because his own father played a part in it. There was a Rabbi who lived in old Czechoslovakia before World War II who was a mystic. He had come to believe that not only did God exist – he came to believe that NOTHING existed except God.

Furthermore, he came to believe that everything that happened, happened for some specific mystical preordained purpose. And so he believed in a form of fate, a fate that God was a part of. He not only believed this, he taught it.

One day he was lecturing in a certain village (the kind we all saw depicted in *Fiddler On The Roof*). He was saying these things he believed and the daughter of the Rabbi who hosted him (her name was Frieda) asked him the following question. “Rabbi,” she said, “believing as you do that all events are fated, would you be willing to go down right now to the place between the mountains where the express train to Warsaw comes through every night at midnight and lay down on the tracks and see if it might be God’s will to take your life tonight or spare you.” The rabbi thought a minute and said, “Yes, I believe in fate that much,” but on one condition. “That if I survive, your father will give me your hand in marriage afterward.”

Well, Frieda’s father had already been looking for a husband for his daughter and here was a famous rabbi, why not? And he agreed. Considering the odds, Frieda gave her assent, as well.

So, just before midnight the whole town went out to the pass between the mountains with torches blazing as the rabbi lay down on the tracks, and they took a wedding canopy with them, just in case.

And the rabbi who believed in fate said the following, “So there will be no chance of anyone being splattered by my mortal remains and thereby made unclean, why don’t you all back-up onto that hill there a few yards away.”

And the whole company complied, and then, right at midnight the train came barreling into the valley and the engineer saw a crowd standing on a promontory above the tracks, torches blazing in the night. Thinking there had been an accident there at the bend, he put on the brakes and slowed the train and stopped just a few feet in front of the rabbi. The crowd cheered, the rabbi jumped up, and the canopy was summoned and right there, on the tracks, they solemnized the marriage of the rabbi and Frieda.

They went away on their honeymoon and word came that they had moved to the United States.

Something like thirty years later Isaac Singer's father, now a resident of Brooklyn, saw the man he recognized as the famous rabbi sitting in a cafeteria, having a cup of coffee. "Rabbi," he said, "I used to live in the little Czeck village you came to where you laid down on the railroad tracks decades ago . . . . Do you still believe that everything is fated?"

"Yes, I do," he said. "Then, would you go out tonight to Penn Station and lay down on the tracks and wait for the Long Island Express to come through and see if tonight God might want to take you from this world?" And the rabbi said, "Yes," he would still be willing to do such a thing. "But," the rabbi said, "I wouldn't marry Frieda again."

In the gospel text appointed for us today, Jesus stands up for free will, as opposed to fate. In fact, he takes a strong stand for radical free will.

He begins by speaking of himself as the Good Shepherd. He doesn't use this term just because it is sweet and endearing. He uses it because he wants to differentiate himself from anyone who does what he does for any reason other than love. Jesus makes his point this way. He says, a hired man will look after a flock of sheep; he will do it for money, and, consequently, if a wolf threatens he will most likely run the away.

In contrast, Jesus says that he himself has chosen the life he has out of love for humanity. And whatever it costs him, he is willing to pay it. To make this crystal clear, he adds the following words that are as precious as any he left us.

*I lay down my life that I might take it up again. No one takes it from me. I lay it down of my own accord.*

If anyone thinks Jesus' death on a Roman cross was just some accident of fate, or that he over-played his hand by going to Jerusalem on Passover, think again. His death was **not** the result of fate, or some tragic betrayal, engineered by Judas, or some conspiracy of Romans and Jewish authorities. Not at all; no, he says he knows the risks he is taking and his reason for doing what he was about to do was love, and love alone

*No one takes my life from me, he says. I'm willing to lay it down all of my own accord.*

He could have chosen a way to live that didn't include suffering and death. It would have meant that he would have had to stop walking around in the open and go underground, and sleep in a different location every night.

Or he could have chosen to simply tone-down his message; back off the hard rhetoric, and find more pleasant ways to phrase things.

He would have had to stop eating with outcasts and show more respect for established authority -- have his picture taken smiling in the presence of the right people, and finally retire to a beachfront home at Caesarea. If he loved his life and wanted to save it, that is.

But he believed that those who work really hard to preserve their lives end up losing them, and those who are willing to give up their lives for purposes bigger than they are, are the ones who wind up "saving" them after all.

This is first a word about Jesus' love for all of us. Secondly, it is a word about living intentionally. Every day is a gift. Every moment holds out to us a new opportunity to live with purpose and forthrightness. To live any other way, says Jesus, is twisted. To live haphazardly, or to live as if nothing really matters is a complete waste of our lives.

The Old Testament book of *Ecclesiastes* backs this up 100%. The writer of that book comes at life with a pretty jaundiced eye. "All is vanity," he says. But, in the end, here is his last admonition.

*Go, eat your bread with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart . . . Enjoy life with the partner, you love, all the days of this . . . life that God has given you under the sun. . . . Whatever your hand finds to do, for heaven's sake, do it with all your might.*

Live intentionally, not haphazardly.

I pointed out the following bit of information a number of years ago in another sermon: Fifty people in their 90s were once asked, "If you had your life to live over what would you do differently?"

Intentionality rings through everything they said.

Three specific responses were repeated over and over -- the respondents said,

- 1) I would reflect more
- 2) I would risk more
- 3) I would do more that would live on after I was gone.

Now I want to give you entirely new thoughts to go with those three responses.

## #1 I WOULD REFLECT MORE:

Some years ago, when she knew her time was short, the wonderful Nora Ephron made two lists:

*What I will miss - & - What I won't miss.*

Here is some of what is on her *What I Won't Miss* list ...

*Dry skin, E-mail, washing my hair, bras, polls that show that 32% of the American people believe in creationism, Clarence Thomas, Mammograms, the sound of the vacuum cleaner, E-mail – I know I already said it, but I want to emphasize it, taking off make-up every night.*

Here is some of what is on her *What I will miss* list ...

*My kids, my husband -Nick, Spring, Fall, waffles, the concept of waffles, Bacon, a walk in the park, the park, reading in bed, laughs, twinkle lights, Butter, Pride and Prejudice, the Christmas tree, the dogwood, taking a bath, coming over the bridge to Manhattan, pie.*

Reflecting like that is what life is all about. Or maybe, to be more specific, it's what makes us human, it's what sets us apart from other creatures.

Reflecting meaningfully is where real worship comes from. It's what this hour is meant to be all about, and if it's not, then we've wasted it.

"If I had my life to live over, I would reflect more."

## #2 I WOULD RISK MORE

Remember the name, Larry Walters ?

He was the 33 year old truck driver from L.A. who spent most of his time sitting in a lawn chair on his back patio wishing he could fly.

Then, one day, he filled 45 Army Surplus weather balloons with helium. He attached them all to a lawn chair – the kind with rivets and polyester webbing.

Then he just took off -- He took with him a parachute, a CB radio, a 6 pack of beer, several peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and a BB gun to pop some of the balloons so he could come down.

Instead of just going up 200 feet over his West LA neighborhood, Larry Walters went up 11,000 ft. into the approach corridor of L.A. X where he was spotted by several pilots. Later, safely on the ground, there was a press conference:

Press: Were you scared?

LW: Wonderfully so.

Press: Would you do it again?

LW: Nope.

Press: Why did you do it in the first place?

LW Well, you can't just sit there.

Well there are other ways to risk creatively without endangering your life or the lives of others. I think of the French painter, Henri Matisse who found himself bed bound at the age of 72. He couldn't paint any longer, but, like Larry Walters he decided, "Well, you can't just sit there," so he began cutting colored paper and turned his cut-outs into some of the most iconic art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

When fellow artists heard that he was turning out cut-outs they thought, "Poor Matisse. He can't paint any longer so he's returned to childhood." It took a lot of courage to do what Matisse did and in time the critics decided he was turning out the finest art of his life.

Matisse felt he had been given a second life. And here is what he said about it:

"Even if I could have done, when I was young, what I am doing now, I wouldn't have dared."

It was a risk – but it led to the greatest chapter in his life and it was a chapter that only a man of his age and maturity and self-confidence would have dared do.

"If I had my life to live over I would risk more."

#3 I WOULD DO MORE THAT WILL LIVE ON AFTER I WAS GONE –

Two and a half years ago I had dinner with a poet named Carl Dennis. Carl had won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry back in 2002.

While we were having a glass of wine in preparation for our meal a journalist who recognized him came by and asked Carl how it felt to win a Pulitzer Prize -- Carl looked right at me, and he said, "It lasted about a week."

What lasts longer than a Pulitzer Prize?

Harvey MacKay is an 86 year old business man and author. When asked what he would do if he had his life to live over he answered this way --

*I would have challenged myself by running more marathons and starting earlier than age 56.*

*My wife is an art historian, and I wish I had taken some courses to be able to converse at her level*

*I would have interviewed my parents and grandparents and learned more about our family history and genealogy. I treasure the lessons I learned from my father – but there is so much more information I wish I had gathered.*

And then Harvey MacKay said this ...

*I would have been a high school basketball coach because at that early age you can make a huge impression on a youth's goals, ethics, discipline, respect and outlook on life. You can touch and shape so many lives.*

"If I had my life to live over, I would do more that would live on after I was gone?"

The wonderful composer, Paul Hindemith is remembered to have said, "Your task, amid confusion rush and noise, is to grasp the lasting, the calm, and the meaningful, and finding it anew, to hold and treasure it."

What of you will live on after you are gone? What investment have you made that no moth can eat or thief of any kind, white collar or otherwise, can break in and steal?

What really lasts?

Do you reflect on such things? Have you put that off? Have you, over your life, taken any risks?

Fifty people over the age of 90 were asked, "If you had your life to live over what would you do differently?"

- 1) I would reflect more
- 2) I would risk more
- 3) I would do more that would live on after I was gone.

Amen