

## *Consulting Death*

A SERMON BY THE REV. RICHARD W. NEAL

BASED ON COLOSSIANS 3:1-11 AND LUKE 12:13-21

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*Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. (Col. 3:2)*

**W**HEN A MAN KNOWS HE IS TO BE HANGED IN A FORTNIGHT, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.<sup>1</sup> That observation by eighteenth-century lexicographer Samuel Johnson may have been on the mind of those in the State Department of Health who designed the new anti-smoking television ad campaign that will start running this month.

The hard-hitting campaign features graphic images that may unsettle some viewers, but that's reportedly not their purpose. According to the Department's Tobacco Control Program director, Jeffrey Willett, "This is an effective approach that's been proven to get the attention of smokers and motivate behavior change."<sup>2</sup> Few things get our attention and motivate behavior change as effectively as the prospect of imminent death.

"Make us know the shortness of our life," the psalmist prayed, "that we may gain wisdom of heart." (Ps. 90:12, *The Grail*) Thomas Merton suggested that before making any significant decision in life, it's important to consult your death, perhaps in order to gain the wisdom of heart necessary to make a good decision. In his book on vocation and authentic life, Gregg Levoy wrote, "Death is a strip search. It points the barrel of mortality at your head and demands to see what you have hidden under your garments. It also asks the question 'What do you love?'"<sup>3</sup>

"What do you love?" That is really the question Jesus put to the nameless man who stepped out of the crowd and demanded, "Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." (Luke 12:13) The man wanted Jesus to settle a family dispute; Jesus wanted the man to settle his priorities. The man wanted Jesus to look after his interest in some property; Jesus wanted the man to look into his interest in life.

So, Jesus pointed "the barrel of mortality" at that man in the crowd and demanded to see what was hidden under his garments, in his heart. He told the story of a rich man who, while busy acquiring possessions and planning how he was going to enjoy his wealth, learned how short his life was. "Tonight you die," God said to him. "And your barn full of goods – who gets it?" (Luke 12:16-21, *The Message*)

The man was like many others in his day and in ours. His eyes were so firmly fixed on the things of life, he lost sight of the life those things were meant to serve. His problem and ours is that we are shortsighted. We give our attention readily to things that pass away, and we give little or no attention to the life that is steadily slipping through our fingers like sand in an hourglass.

As the Roman philosopher Seneca, a contemporary of Jesus, wrote in one of his letters, people "set very great store by pensions and doles, and for these they hire out their labor or service or effort. But no one sets a value on time; all use it lavishly as if it cost nothing"<sup>4</sup> and has no end.

But it does have an end. There is a number associated with our length of days. Old age surprises us, Seneca wrote, and we come to it unprepared and unarmed. We make no provision for it, and we stumble upon it suddenly and unexpectedly, not noticing that it was drawing near day by day.

Jesus points the barrel of mortality at our heads, too, and wants to know: What do you love? What are you living for, specifically and concretely, and what's keeping you from it? Where have you invested your heart – in some possessions that will end up auctioned off in an estate sale or sold in a Goodwill store, or in your relationship with God and with your family and with your neighbors?

We don't know if the man in the inheritance dispute got the point and gained wisdom of heart, but he doesn't really matter, after all. What matters is, do we get the point? Do *you* get the point? Will our hearts grow wise as we consult our death in the choices we make every day? "Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly [and] set your minds on things that are above." (Col. 3:5, 2)

NOTES: ▪ 1. Quoted by James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, 19 September 1777. ▪ 2. "Hard-hitting anti-smoking ads to be aired," *The Buffalo News*, 29 July 2010. ▪ 3. Gregg Levoy, *Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997), 31. ▪ 4. Lucius Seneca, "On the Shortness of Life."