

The Wise and the Foolish

If you are like me, you were shocked this past Monday as you heard the news of a crazed shooter killing four people and then himself, and wounding four others. The shooting took place not at a mall or a school or a tavern or a poor area of town, but at a prominent office building on Park Avenue, New York City – right across from St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church. The building, 345 Park Avenue, is home to the headquarters of the National Football League, Blackstone Investments and KPMG, the largest accounting firm in the world. New Yorkers, who still remember the shooting of a United Health Care executive several months ago, are increasingly wondering if there is any way to be safe from people who want to kill you.

When tragedy happens, it gives us pause to reflect on our lives. What's our reason for living? Why are we on this earth? And what happens when our life ends, hopefully not by an act of violence, but someday in some way.

As I mentioned, KPMG was one of the companies in that office building. A former executive of KPMG was Eugene O'Kelly. He was the energetic 53-year-old CEO and Chairperson of the Board. In May 2005, he was unexpectedly diagnosed with brain cancer. The doctors gave him three months to live. What do you do when you know the end is near?

In O'Kelly's case, he decided to author a book detailing his experience through his downward spiral, from diagnosis in May to the process of dying in September. The book published after his death, *Chasing Daylight: How My Forthcoming Death Transformed My Life*, became a *New York Times* bestseller.

O'Kelly is ruthlessly honest in evaluating his life. He drew five concentric circles from those he most loved in the inner circles to those who were peripheral to his life in the outer circles. The inner circle was his wife. The next circle were his children. The third circle were his close friends and relatives. The fourth were friends in the company and through clubs. The fifth were business colleagues, associates, and other executives.

In looking back on his life, O'Kelly realized that he had spent most of his time with the people in the outer circles and had neglected the ones in the inner circles. For example, he rarely, if ever had lunch with his wife or spent

much time with his children, but his schedule was full of the people in the outer circles – the ones that were important to him professionally but not emotionally.

O’Kelly’s last three months of life were a chance for him to bring closure to his relationships with his family, friends, and colleagues. He recognized that he had been given the gift of knowing how much time he had left on this earth and to self-reflect and focus on the things that mattered most to him.¹

I suspect that most of us, as we get older, think about the prospect of our death. When we are thirty, forty or even fifty, death seems far away. We have ambitions and goals. We focus on our career; follow our investments and plan our next vacation. We don’t worry about dying. And that’s the way it should be. We can’t live in a perpetual state of fear. Even for the executives and employees at 345 Park Avenue, they need to get up in the morning and go back to work. Life goes on. Still, Jesus warns us, “You know not the day nor the hour.” Someday there will be no more days.

That is the message of our gospel. It’s not a warm, fuzzy gospel or a feel-good gospel. It’s a gospel that warns us that we should not take our lives for granted. It’s a gospel that asks us to take stock of what’s most important to us.

The background of our story is an incident that occurred in Galilee as Jesus was teaching to a large crowd. A young man called out from the crowd and said, “Rabbi, tell my brother to divide the inheritance of our father.”

Now, the Jewish law clearly prescribed that at the death of a father, the elder son received two-thirds of the inheritance, and the younger son received one-third. This is obviously a younger son who is complaining about the inherent unfairness of it all. Nothing will divide brothers and sisters more than dividing up an estate. So it was then, and so it is now.

Jesus refused to get involved in a petty, family quarrel. He didn’t come to play mediator to warring brothers. Instead Jesus tells a parable about a rich man whom he calls a fool. Business was good, so good that his barns were full. He had more than enough for the rest of his life. He could sit back, relax; eat, drink and be merry. He had all the security in the world. But Jesus calls him a fool. This man, who put his security in barns full of grain would leave it all behind him that night. He thought he had everything, but he

would die with nothing. He placed his security on stuff, but that could not save him. God comes to this rich man and says, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” Jesus concludes by saying, “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

This parable is not about money. It is a parable about our values and what is important to us. We have only so much time on this earth. How are we making use of it? Someday will be our last day. Are we ready?

Several years ago I read an article by Wells Lyman; the retired President of the San Diego Bar Association. He recounted being at the American Bar Association’s Annual Bar Leadership Conference in Chicago where a breakfast speaker kept saying, “There will be a first time and a last time.” As the speech concluded, he said more emphatically, “You must remember, there will be a first time and a last time. There will be the first time you go to court and the last time. There will be the first time you see a friend and the last time. There will be the first time you sit with your family and have dinner and one last time.” Then he said, “If you know there is a first time and a last time for everything, it will change the way you think about everything.”²

That’s excellent advice, not just for lawyer but for all of us. We need to take every moment seriously because we never know if it will be our last. That doesn’t mean being fearful or fretful. It means living with integrity, being authentic and true to our deepest values and beliefs and resolving to make the world a better place by our living in it.

I am often asked how much time I take to prepare my sermons. My answer is, “As much time as it takes to get the message right.” When I was a graduate student, a Jesuit priest told me that in the sacristy of his church in Westminster, Maryland, there was a plaque that read: “Priest, say this Mass as if it were your first Mass, your last Mass, your only Mass.” I’ve always taken those words to heart and have applied them to preaching. As I prepare my sermon, I say to myself, “Gary, preach this sermon as if it were your first sermon, your last sermon, your only sermon.” Honestly, being aware this could be my last sermon makes an enormous difference in my preparation.

Life is full of the unexpected, and only a fool, as in our gospel, ignores that fact. We are coasting along, feeling financially and emotionally secure,

making plans for a major vacation, thinking about making changes to our financial portfolio, and suddenly life takes a curve we didn't see coming. We may not get brain cancer like Eugene O'Kelly or be the victim of a shooter, but how many of us got COVID during the pandemic? A virus that we can't even see can kill us or at least make us seriously ill. You know what I mean. The rich man in our gospel was so obsessed with his economic security that he ignored his eternal security. And for that, Jesus calls him a fool.

St. Augustine said that "you are what you love," and if what you love is stuff, profit, the things of this world, then you are guaranteed only one thing: you will lose them. If your hope and joy are bound to them, then you will lose all your hope and joy.

Free yourself! That's what Jesus is saying. Loosen the cords that bind your heart to the things of this world and invest your heart in God and in the things of God. And if your heart is divided and is given to the things of this world more than to God, then train your heart to make spiritual investments first, for as Jesus says, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt. 6:21).

In his day John D. Rockefeller was the richest man in the United States, but at age 53 he was dying. He lost a great deal of weight, his hair and eyebrows had fallen out, he was confined to bed in terrible pain. Rockefeller had what might be called a deathbed conversion. As he reflected on his life, he resolved that he did not want to be remembered for the money he had made in business, but for the money he would give away for the benefit of humanity. He prayed that if God would give him a second chance at life, he would spend it with as much energy giving away his money as he did in making it.

Rockefeller did get that second chance. Miraculously, he recovered his health. And true to his word, for the second part of his life until he died at the age of 97, he gave away as much money as he had earned – and became one of the greatest philanthropists of all time.

It happens, doesn't it? People who had a close brush with death seem to change their whole attitude about life. Things which seem of immense importance when we are healthy seem to have little consequence when we are dying. And what we once took for granted now takes on immense value.

When I was a senior at St. Francis Prep in New York City, the class went on a pre-graduation retreat in Fairfield, Connecticut. The leader of the retreat said something that has stayed with me throughout my life. He told us that we should develop our own personal timeline. All of us have a timeline, he said, that starts at birth and ends with death. Between birth and death, there is the life God has given us. We don't know how long we will live, but we do know that at some point our life will end. So our time on this earth is limited. The question then becomes: How are we using this precious but limited gift of life? In the relatively brief time we have on this earth, what kind of legacy will we leave behind?

Knowing that someday your life will end, ask yourself: "How am I going to live the rest of my life? Will I place my security in that which inevitably will pass away or in what will last forever?" Jesus says there is only one real security, and that is God. Everything else at some point will fail. You can trust God with your life no matter what the future holds. Only a fool lives on this earth for a day or a year or even one hundred years, but the wise person lives for an eternity with Jesus. That is true wealth.

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Text – Luke 12:12-21

Proper 13, C

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1. Eugene O'Kelly, *Chasing Daylight: How My Forthcoming Death Transformed My Life* (McGraw-Hill, 2007).
2. *San Diego Lawyer*, November/December 2005, 8.