

WHAT IS LIFE?

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What is life? That is a question not to be answered in a multitude of sermons. Life is a mystery. In medieval times part of the alchemist's mission was the search for gold - the attempt to transmute base metals into gold. A consuming scientific interest today is the search for life: the search for the origins of life, the search for life on other planets, and, too, the search for ways to manipulate life that already exists.

The dictionary defines life as a principle or force that is considered to underlie the distinctive quality of animate beings. It goes on to include a definition of life as a state characterized by capacity for metabolism, growth, reaction to stimuli, and reproduction. Another dictionary adds to this list, adaptation to environment.

Aside from being alive merely in a biological sense, what does it mean to any living thing to have life? The life of a rose is in some way different from the life of the rosebush from which it springs. It is, as we see it, an evanescent moment of beauty, coming to fulfillment and soon vanished. It is life contributing to the life of its parent bush, helping to fulfill its cycle of growth. Think of the seemingly infinite variety of life in the plant world alone. Is life the same thing for a rose or an oak tree, a beet or a cactus plant, for a venus flytrap or a violet?

How about life in the insect world? The life of the individual here is certainly subordinate to the life of the species. The cycle of egg, larva, chrysalis, adult is rapid, and repeated endlessly. Does the adult insect exist for any other reason than to reproduce its kind? Does life mean anything different for ants in a hill and bees in a hive--insect societies with differentiation of work and definite purpose--than it does for a solitary wasp, a water strider on a pond, a dragon fly, or a praying mantis?

It is obvious to anyone who is a backyard birdwatcher that life has some meaning for birds. Each species has its own courting routine. Birds' nests are not all alike, but within each species there is a definite pattern as to where and how the nests are built. The solicitude with which most parent birds feed, watch over, defend and train their young is something to see and hear.

Life is a mystery. Why do insect wings differ, or the colors of scales on butterfly wings? Why are robins' eggs such a beautiful shade of blue and some other birds' eggs speckled? Why are some birds gifted with such glorious color combinations in their feathers while others are so drab, but all with such intricate and useful configuration of feathers?

What is life? Do we exist only for procreation, to propagate our own kind? Obviously that is part of life for any species, and perhaps all of life for many. But as we consider the various forms of life, from what are known as the lower forms to the higher, we see something which is more than just instinct, a concern for offspring, a taking of responsibility, a developing consciousness. Teilhard de Chardin, in his Phenomenon of Man, presents and develops the proposition that the ultimate goal of the universe is what he calls "the noosphere," the realm of mind. What differentiates the species homo sapiens, i.e., man wise, or man knowing, is its ability to reflect, to

know and to know that one knows - consciousness turning in upon itself. Teilhard looks on life as an ascent of consciousness. We humans do not even know the limits of our capacity. We are continually discovering farther and farther limits in invention, creativity, knowing about ourselves and the ever widening world in which we find ourselves. Teilhard sees consciousness as a dimension with no ceiling.

Life is a gift. Each living thing responds to this gift in its own way. The precision of movements of insects becomes a rigid pattern. But there is unexpectedness, curiosity, affection, exuberance in the actions of a dog - a cat - an otter. And we who have an overview of other living things, what do they mean to us? What is a worm to a robin except food for itself and its young? It may be an unlovely creature to many of us, but to a gardener it is a living thing which improves the soil; to a fisherman or to his fish it is a delectable piece of bait. Is it possible, even for us, to view the earthworm as a creature in itself, a living thing which has the gift of life, and its own value, aside from any utilitarian value for us? We could ask the same question about almost anything that has life. Is our reaction to, our attitude toward every other living thing, determined by our own convenience? And do we react to other people in the same way?

Martin Buber, in I and Thou, says there are three areas in which we can have an I-Thou encounter or relationship. One is the area of nature - such as a tree; another is the realm of art; and the third is the realm of persons. But if we approach any of these as things to be analyzed or used, the I-Thou relationship becomes an I-It relationship. He says: "Does the tree then have consciousness, similar to our own? I have no experience of that. But though we succeed in doing it with ourselves, do we have to divide the indivisible? What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself." Do we encounter a person as a whole person? Buber says the I-Thou relationship is one which we cannot hold onto for long - it comes and goes.

What do we do with the gift of life?

The goal of ourselves, says Teilhard, is not our individuality but our person - found by uniting together. We grow only with and by all others. "Love alone," he says, "is capable of uniting living beings in such a way as to complete and fulfill them, for it alone takes them and joins them by what is deepest in themselves."

Paul Tillich, in The New Being, says people need to be allowed to give love, to waste themselves. He goes on to take this beyond the realm of the purely human and says:

"I shall never forget the word of a wise old man who said to my grandfather when I was still a child, 'I need somebody whom I can thank when a great joy is given to me.'"

And later in the same book:

"He who is not able to perceive something ultimate, something infinitely significant, is not a man. Man is man because he is able to receive a word from the dimension of the eternal....the word from the Lord....the word comes to us and tells us that we can say yes to ourselves because an eternal yes has been said to us and of us. But we resist the word which demands of us the courage to say yes to ourselves, because we are in love with our doubt and our guilt and our despair."

In the story called "Flowering Judas" by Katherine Anne Porter we see a young woman named Laura who, in essence, says "No" to life, to herself.

"She is not at home in the world. Every day she teaches children who remain strangers to her, though she loves their tender round hands and their charming opportunist savagery. She knocks at unfamiliar doors not knowing whether a friend or a stranger shall answer, and even if a known face emerges from the sour gloom of that unknown interior, still it is the face of a stranger. No matter what this stranger says to her, nor what her message to him, the very cells of her flesh reject knowledge and kinship in one monotonous word. No. No. No. She draws her strength from this one holy talismanic word which does not suffer her to be led into evil. Denying everything, she may walk anywhere in safety, she looks at everything without amazement."

Jesus said, "I came that you might have life and have it more abundantly." To him the abundant life, as he lived it himself, was a life of creative living with other people, a life of ministering, of finding one's life by losing it - drawing strength for the living from his relationship with God.

This was not a promise of unadulterated happiness, whatever that may be. This abundant living included suffering, for that is a part of life for any species; it included criticism and persecution, which is chiefly characteristic of our species; it included disappointment in the actions of one's friends. But the human spirit can say "yes!" to life in spite of all of these.

People who say "no" to life are apt to find themselves isolated. On the whole, I think we are much more apt to prefer the company of people who have a certain amount of exuberance and self-giving. A family unit is somewhat ready-made for an interchange of affection, giving and receiving - if it behaves as it should. But it is certainly not a requirement that one be part of a family unit in order to say yes to life and to oneself. On this Memorial Day Sunday I should like to call to mind three members of Pilgrim Church who affirmed life in different ways. They lived long, useful, and, I feel, quite rewarding lives. They all happen to be women, and none married and brought up a family, so their lives were not somewhat automatically set in a pattern of contact with others. I could mention many others; these three came to mind first.

One is Clara Blodgett. She and her brother Frank joined Pilgrim Church in 1895. Clara was a member for 69 years until her death in 1964. In looking through church bulletins from many years back I discovered that she was mentioned now and then as helping with a church dinner, and that she was for a number of years church school librarian. Mr. Matter recollects that Frank Blodgett had a shoe store or a shoe repairing business and that Clara helped her brother in the shop. When I knew Clara Blodgett she was already old in years though not in spirit. She seemed to be much in demand as a baby sitter. I used to pick her up and bring her to church dinners, but her attendance was contingent on whether she had a baby sitting job. We tend to think today of baby sitters as being teenagers, but Clara Blodgett, in her early 80's, seemed to enjoy taking care of children, and I'm sure the children loved her, for she was always cheerful and enjoyed whatever she was doing at the moment.

The second person whom I recall is Christina Johnson who lived a long and full life of service. She had had a tearoom known as The Green Parrot in Solon Springs, Wisconsin. When she came to Duluth her cooking talents and Polly, the green parrot, came along with her. Christina kept house for her sister and brother-in-law in their last years, and then the house at 2431 East 5th Street became a home to many people. I lived there the first year I was in Duluth. Five of us had rooms there and a number of others came in for breakfasts and dinners. We constituted a family for Tean, as she was affectionately known. Tean cooked for us, waited on us, counseled us, arranged parties and picnics, and went out to dinner with us on Saturday nights - her one non-cooking dinner. Tean was a superb cook and a gracious hostess. She made bread, rolls, cakes - everything from scratch. Polly, the parrot, would entertain by singing "Mary had a little lamb" - she did quite well by the tune, but the voice was something else, and she would often quit in the middle of a word. I am told that during World War II Tean provided lunch for the Lab School children, and children often came into the house whose doors were always open until late at night. Tean maintained this household, this family, which changed as someone moved away and was replaced by someone else, until the last three years of her life, when she sold the house and moved to St. Ann's at the age of 81 or 82.

The third person I want to recall is well known to many of you - Ruth Alta Rogers. Her interests were as far from housekeeping and cooking as possible. She believed in reincarnation and fervently hoped that in her next life she would not be involved in any sort of housekeeping activity - in fact, I think she would have preferred to live the same kind of life all over again.

Miss Rogers first began playing the organ in Pilgrim Church in 1903, having graduated from Oberlin Conservatory in 1901. Her service here was interrupted for study abroad and then from 1919 through August 1964 she was organist and choir director. It was through her that Pilgrim Church acquired a reputation in Duluth for good music well performed. Miss Rogers' piano students were always the best prepared of any who entered the UMD Music Department. Her annual piano student recitals were a survey of the best in piano literature for young pupils, and, until the last few years of her teaching, her students included the whole range of playing ability from beginners to the very proficient. She worked hard and she enjoyed her work. She had a genuine personal interest in each of her pupils.

Miss Rogers was a lady in the true sense of the word - a person of refinement and integrity. She was also a person of determination. She lived for her music and was perhaps one-sided in this respect. This produced some conflicts within her pupils. She always hoped, and sometimes vehemently expressed this hope, that her best women pupils would not get married. She was sure that if they did their music would suffer; they would not devote their lives to it.

But Ruth Rogers enjoyed other aspects of life. She always ate very heartily when she came to our house, perhaps because she didn't bother much with cooking for herself. She enjoyed our dogs and played with them. She loved flowers. She enjoyed the sound of a brook, or the waves of the lake lapping on the shore. I should say she lived abundantly, in her own way.

Each of these three people chose life, said "yes" to life. Each lived to what used to be known as "a ripe old age", but which doesn't seem so old any more. Each served others in her own way. Each had, I am sure, a large measure of enjoyment and satisfaction.

What is life? Each of us has to find an answer for ourselves. But one way in which we can be helped to find an answer as to the purpose and function of our own lives is through those whom we know and those we have known.

LIFE AND DEATH

The point of departure for Things out of Season is the impact, both sudden and enduring, of the death of a friend. But the sermon concerns itself more largely with one of the great challenges of living: how to cope with the unexpected, untimely events that break through the comfortable regularities of our existence.

We are the Lord's is the last of a series of sermons on the theme of life after death. The previous sermon stressed the idea that in the New Testament "eternal life" should be approached not quantitatively as a mere extension of our lives in time, but qualitatively as life lived out of love for God and neighbor. This final sermon in the series went a step further.