

Ever heard of Chuck Feeney? Jim Ely suggested to me, *The Billionaire Who Wasn't*, a book by Conor O'Clery about how Chuck Feeney secretly made and gave away a fortune, literally billions of dollars. I think his idea of not waiting to give away his wealth until the end of his life, but rather start giving it away during his life, came around the time of serious losses in his life. It seems a key turning point came when his nephew Jimmy was hit by an out-of-control fire truck and hospitalized. Chuck flew to be with him and poured all kinds of money into the best care possible. But sadly, his nephew died. Death is often a clarifying moment.¹ Death gave Chuck Feeney perspective, and he began to realize that it's one thing to make a lot of money. That's success. But it's quite another to be able to give it away. That's significance. Hopefully clarifying moments help us to move from success to significance.

For the past twenty months the world has been struggling with the Covid 19 pandemic. We are still seeing thousands of deaths worldwide each day, with over 5 million people having died from the virus to date. That is over a quarter million deaths per month globally. So, I know we're not close to being "finished" with the pandemic just yet, but peoples' perspective has changed. A record 4.4 million Americans quit their jobs in September. The Great Resignation, I think, has in part to do with the realization that life is short and now is the time to make a change.

The 26th annual "Conference of Parties," otherwise known as COP26, or the Climate Summit in Glasgow concluded this weekend and, if you haven't been following, signals nothing more and nothing less than, "Houston, we have a problem!" No matter what your politics may be, scientists around the world are warning we have a crisis in environmental stewardship and pollution is killing our planet. We need to stop just talking and accelerate concrete changes to our way of living to protect our precious planet's fragile eco-systems and the reality we are leaving for future generations...

On this penultimate Sunday of the church calendar, whether with more personal losses like Chuck Feeney, or more global losses with COVID and climate change, we are being given a variety of reality checks to help us focus better on what is really important, what is really of ultimate significance...

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus invites us to reflect on what our focus is. Notice as they come out of the temple, his disciples say to Jesus, "Look, Teacher..." This text presents first a question about what our focus is. Where are we focusing our attention? What are you looking at? The disciples were awed and amazed by the "large stones" and "large buildings" of the temple. Jesus replies shockingly, "Do you see these great buildings? ... all will be thrown down."

This passage is part of what is called "The Little Apocalypse" in the Gospel according to Mark. It's part of the longest speech of Jesus in Mark. That's important. Jesus warns of the destruction of

¹ Conor O'Clery, *The Billionaire Who Wasn't* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), 171.

the physical temple, which actually occurred in 70 A.D. Jewish historian Josephus wrote that “those that were slain were more in number than those that slew them. The ground was nowhere visible. All was covered with corpses...”²*All were thrown down...*

Jesus makes it very clear that this world is never going to be what we think is *secure*. Remember that apocalypse simply means *revealing*. Here Jesus is trying to get his disciples to reflect on how hard it is to see what is really important when it comes to faith and what or who we can trust. For example, just before our text is the story of the *Widow's Offering*. Rich people were putting in large sums of money into the temple treasury, but Jesus was watching all the people, and he singles out the poor widow as the real giver: “She out of her poverty has put in *everything* she had, *all* she had to live on.”

Jesus invites us to look at life differently, and to recognize that sometimes what seems so important to us in one moment, all of sudden becomes irrelevant in relation to what is eternal, what is ultimate. If we are to enter into the Kingdom of God, Jesus is saying, your perspective and your priorities must change. He says *the last will be first and the first will be last*. Faith like a *mustard seed* can move mountains. He says we are the *salt* of the earth and the *light* of the world... All of that is perplexing. Jesus teaches that we are to forgive. We are to love our enemies. We are to be peacemakers. It's disorienting, really. It's counter cultural. Jesus calls us to sacrificial love. It looks different. For Jesus, what looks like the end is just a beginning, and even death means new life in the Kingdom of God!

Notice that Mark gives the detail in our lesson today that Jesus was “sitting on the Mount of Olives...” Peter, James and John asked him about a sign when all these things are about to be accomplished? The Greek phrase *sunteleisthai panta*, which the *NRSV* translates as “accomplished” is a fascinating phrase and is better translated something like: “all things brought to completion together.” (The root word is *telos*, and is the stem for our word, “telescope.” It means the “end, goal, completion, consummation,” and with the prefix *sun*, which means “together,” is added *panta*, which means “all.”) This vast, cosmic, all-inclusive summation refers to the work of Christ. That Jesus is sitting on the Mount of Olives is an important clue to *how* God is bringing all things together for completion.

The Mount of Olives is where the Garden of Gethsemane is located, where Jesus prayed just before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Do you see? Jesus is connecting the destruction of the Temple with the end of the current age and the coming Kingdom of God. Jesus is saying there is a new kind of power that will overcome the older kind of power. Self-giving love. Jesus says, “Do not be alarmed...This is but the beginning of the birth pangs...” Like a woman in labor, suffering brings forth life. It is painful, but new life is coming!

This is echoed in our Hebrews text. In the life, death, and resurrection of Christ *everything has changed*. In fact, the Temple was the structure where a whole system of sacrifice took place to maintain the community's relationship with God. The writer of Hebrews argues that the death of Jesus becomes the ultimate sacrifice and makes the most incredible claim: “By a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified...” What this means is nothing short of

² Josephus, Flavius, *The Complete Works*, ed. by William Whiston, A.M. (Chicago: Thompson & Thomas, 1850), 679.

miraculous: That by putting your faith in Christ you are seen as *perfect* before God. Guess what, the root of this word translated perfected is *telos* too! You are brought together and will find *completion* as you live trusting in Christ.

Having to power up and measure up is not the way of Christ. We do not pursue a spirituality of “Look busy, Jesus is coming!” Salvation is grace. It is a pure gift. Christ has *accomplished* for us what we could not accomplish for ourselves. There are no more sacrifices required to put us right with God. By the blood of Christ, we are welcome by God in “full assurance of faith.” Because of what Christ has done, we relate to God with a clean heart and a pure conscience.

Today, our new members will affirm their faith in Christ, and I love to review the same questions and answers for myself. I want to renew my faith daily and invite you to do so as well. Put your trust in Jesus Christ as Lord, for in him, you have *full assurance* of your salvation!

For too many people in the world, there are times when everything that we hold dear is taken away... Such clarifying moments are precisely when we must hold fast to Him who has promised, and to Him who is faithful.

There is a certain irony in that we are here in this absolutely beautiful building... but we know that all of this will go away one day. If it has any meaning at all, it is here to point us to something greater than ourselves.

Here, we are to “provoke one another to love and good deeds, meeting together and encouraging one another...” In other words, when those clarifying moments come and we face what seems like the end, the question is not “Where is God?” but “Where are the Christians?” We are called to “hold fast to the confession of our hope” and go into the world to show the compassion and mercy of God. We are to be the hands and feet of Christ. Love and good deeds are signs of the coming Kingdom of God... Heaven is here and now whenever we take time to listen to those who suffer, to visit the sick and the prisoner, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and pray with those who mourn... Our worship service here is best consummated out there in loving service ...

So, I ask you in these penultimate post-pandemic days when we are reflecting on stewardship and life choices, trying to see what’s really going on: Do you see what God has done for you in Jesus Christ, that in him you are offered the gift of new life and hope no matter what happens in this world? Do you see what Chuck Feeney learned, that the only thing that matters is the offering we make to give life to others? Do you see that in Christ, God is always present with us, and is a God who calls us to love and bring forth life even amidst the death-dealing ways of this world? Friends, I invite you to offer yourself again to the Lord of Life, the One who says in life and in death, “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.