

**»Our lives are determined by the End
a lot more than we think«**

Grace be to you and Peace from Him who was, who is and who is to come, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear congregation!

For many of us the Divine Service today on Eternity Sunday is one that lays heavy on our hearts: we are reminded of difficult and painful moments of the past year, even the years before. Old wounds break open again, the memories of experiencing grief and sorrow and helplessness in the face of death and losing a loved one. Death has a way of breaking into our lives with an enormous and overwhelming force, causing us to be utterly vulnerable and helpless. In a massive way, it robs us of the future we have dreamt of and hoped for. Plans are shaken, even destroyed and our hopes and dreams must be buried. Death remains the biggest and hardest question of our lives; it remains the toughest question of true meaning. It is the question of what is it that is capable to carry and sustain my life and give it a goal worth striving for. We will only find a satisfying answer to this fundamental life question when we realize and accept that our lifetime here on this earth is in fact limited and when we learn how to fill the time given to us with real meaning. Our sermon text for today wants to help us move in this direction. I read from Luke 12: 42-48

The LORD answered: *“Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. Truly, I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose the servant says to himself, ‘My master is taking a long time in coming,’ and he then begins to beat the other servants, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the un-*

believers. The servant who knows the master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

Ready to run? I was when I first read this text. And most commentaries steer well clear of this text in Luke as well. I don’t blame them. Very, in fact extremely harsh words are used here. Without any investigation or even a trial, the master does not only decide over the life and death of his slave, he also carries out the death sentence by means of cutting the servant in half according to Persian law and manner. And the rest get beaten, some with many, others with less blows. Wow! Very harsh words indeed and the evangelist Luke is putting them in Jesus’ mouth!

Let us remain in this highly uncomfortable place for a moment. Because this is indeed serious. This is about the essence of our lives, no less! Here Jesus is taking you to the heart of the matter, to the center of your life, your personal future and your personal time of life that you have left on this earth. Because, of course, it is possible for us to lose our focus in life and pursue matters which have little to do with the central things with which we should be occupied. In fact, it is possible for us to become hysterically confident that the things with which we surround ourselves at the periphery are in fact the most important things in the world to us. But at what cost?

We only have to think about the damage to our environment as a consequence of our irresponsible and insatiable quest for enjoyment, immediate gratification and quick profits, to name but a few. So, the central question that is being asked us by the text today is indeed an extremely important one: In the face of the ever-growing threat of a sustainable future for this earth and its people and the death of our planet, what would be a responsible and meaningful way of living look

like for us in the present? What do we do with all the wonderful things God has entrusted to us: our lives, the people in our lives, the world in which we live our lives?

From the beginnings of the early church it was the trademark of Christians to live their lives according to the future they were expecting. In this parable Jesus shows us that Christians live in the great expectation of their Lord Jesus Christ returning, of Christ coming again. His coming and the Kingdom of God that will be established with His coming is the standard criteria and ultimate goal of all life. In other words, the coming of Christ at an unknown time in the future, determines and steers life in the present. It is for this second coming of Christ that Christendom prays for since its beginnings: "Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!" We pray for this in the Lord's prayer as well: "Your kingdom come!" And it is for this second coming of Christ that the whole creation is waiting and yearning for, as Paul points out in Romans 8:22 *We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*

In the coming of Christ lies the whole expectation of salvation and judgment. That makes the day of His return the all deciding factor for the life of the Christian and his or her attitude towards people and creation. The fact that we can count on Christ our Lord coming again (because he gave us His promise through His Word) gives us the chance and the opportunity to utilize the time that has been given to us in a meaningful manner. It protects us from the danger of simply falling into motionless resignation because the problems in the world and around us are too big and too many, as that we could do anything about it. It also protects us from the compulsive need to enjoy life while we still can and exploit every resource available to us for pure enjoyment and thereby losing ourselves in the process. The time that remains until our Lord returns is neither a time of motionless resignation, doing absolutely nothing and just waiting for His return with our hands folded in our laps, nor is it a time we can just mindlessly squander the

resources available to us in order to get as much enjoyment and satisfaction for ourselves as possible! No, it is a time of great responsibility for the people and the world God gave us! Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said: "It may be that the day of Christ's return is tomorrow, then we shall gladly put down all the work for a better future, but not beforehand." Yes, God has given us the gift of life, abundant life. With this great gift God also entrusts us with the responsibility to take care of this life and the lives we come into contact with.

When we take this responsibility for people and creation seriously, we will realize how our lives change for the better. We will see how the seemingly damnable future will lose its tight grip and paralyzing threat. We will experience, that even the smallest step we take towards goodwill is helpful and can make a difference. We will come to see that even when we feel helpless and powerless to do anything, something can still change for the better. We will be reassured that we will be able to answer the biggest life question that will come to us in the end.

But right now, we are still sitting in that uncomfortable place I mentioned earlier, aren't we? That place of being cut in half, of being beaten, the place of punishment if we cannot answer this central life question in a satisfying manner. This is also what gave me sleepless nights. Until I was given a passage that opened the gates of paradise (as Luther put it when he realized what the meaning of atonement with God and salvation in Christ really meant.) In the Gospel, according to Matthew we learn that "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." In the words of Isaiah 52 and 53 we hear about the fate of this suffering servant, Christ himself. A fate suffered in our place and for our sake. Listen carefully:

Just as there were many who were appalled at him – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness. Isaiah 52:14

Does this not sound awfully similar to the brutality we heard about in our sermon text in Luke? Therefore,

Surely, he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, for the transgression of my people he was punished. Isaiah 53:4-8

Is Jesus perhaps pointing to Himself when He tells this parable in Luke? Who was brutally cut up and severely beaten by forty lashes plus one? Jesus became despised and rejected for us, for the people condemned him and the high priest stated that he is cut off from the Lord, for he blasphemed God's name by calling God his Father. Jesus was willing to take this, our sin, on himself. In our place and for our sake, it was Him, Jesus Christ, who was crushed for our iniquities. He did this all for you and for me! This curse that was on the sinner, on us, was broken by Jesus for us! This, my dear congregation, is anything but a small matter. This is what should cause us to sit up straight and listen carefully. This is what should cause us to earnestly ask ourselves the question: What have I done? What am I doing with my life? For this, my life, has been saved and bought at a tremendous cost! Therefore, I simply cannot squander my life away and mindlessly do whatever I please whenever I please until the Lord finally comes one day. These words call for earnest introspection, for yes, we will one day be asked: What have you done with your life? How did you spend the time given to you? Are we focused on the very reason why we live and work in the master's house? To share in his joy? To belong to him and to know his love? Or are we busy with peripheral matters only which keep us from understanding whose we really are!

These words call us to responsible and meaningful living! Because your life and my life carry an outrageously high price tag, and because of that it absolutely does matter what we do with our lives. In fact, everything you do matters! From the smallest to the greatest thing. And how do we know that we are doing the right thing, as God intended? Two simple questions guide me in this matter: Is what I'm doing helpful? Or is what I'm doing harmful? And I'm pretty sure God is more interested in the helpful...

So, in closing, dear friends, God's relentless love for you and for me cost Him more dearly than we can ever imagine! And ultimately this is what gives deep and true meaning and purpose to our lives – and even to our death too. There's an insufferable hope in both your life and in your death. Life is no longer a blind ride into the unknown, for in Christ it has a set goal. We are encouraged again today to live towards this goal! Every day that we are given life, we may accept and receive it as a wonderful gift, given to us to fill it with meaning and purpose.

And death is no longer the ultimate end of life but the passage to a fulfilled and everlasting life. Jesus is showing us the great and wonderful and endless possibilities we have, to fearlessly go out there and live a life of true meaning and purpose. For death has lost its sting and is not the end but the fulfillment of all life. Therefore go, and live your life in Christ, with meaning and purpose, knowing that you belong to God eternally!

And the love and peace of God that is greater than all our understanding go with you and guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

Amen.