

After It Is All Over
A Sermon on Psalm 24 by the Rev. Philip Major
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If there is one thing I have learned in the past four years it is that we cannot fully understand the meaning or impact of someone's life until it is over. Before they died I did not fully understand the meaning of the life of my father, the life of my mother, and the life of my dear wife. I knew they were great people. But in the months after each one of them died, I realized that my father and my mother and my wife were saints. Each one of them loved people. Each one of them worked for justice. Each one tried to know and live the truth. I only understood the meaning of their lives after it was all over.

Of course my wife, my mother and my father were not perfect in any of these endeavors. There were a few times when each of them failed completely at the art of loving, or at the work of justice, or in their devotion to living the truth. But there are no saints who are perfect.

Saints are not perfect people. Saints are people who are quite imperfect, yet who try to love, to do justice, to know and live the truth. Saints are people who, after it is all over, we look back and say, "Yes, love and truth and justice were in the center of his life, or in the center of her life." Saints are people who were trying to do God's work of love, through the ups and downs, through the good parts and the bad parts of life.

Our Psalm appointed for All Saints Day describes a generation of people who seek the Lord. These people are not perfect but they have clean hands. That means they have not willfully hurt others. These people are not perfect but they have pure hearts. That means their motive is not to take things that don't belong to them; their motive is not to gain power over others. These people are not perfect but their motive is to help others and to love.

Psalm 24 draws a clear boundary between two groups of people. The boundary is based upon behavior. One group of people spend most of their lives trying to do the right thing. The second group of people spend much of their lives doing the wrong thing in a way that hurts other people.

The psalm clarifies the boundary between the two groups in verse four: *they have not pledged themselves to falsehood, nor sworn by what is a fraud*. Unfortunately we have a well known example of an entire group of people who pledged themselves to falsehood, an entire group of people who quite obviously swore to what was a fraud. 10 years ago we began to see the full extent of the damage caused by predatory lending practices by banks and mortgage companies.

Hundreds of thousands of Americans lost their homes and the promise of financial stability in the housing crisis. After it was all over we saw one of the reasons for the housing crisis was a set of business practices called predatory lending. I never heard the phrase 'predatory lending' until 10 years ago. That was when we learned about the way banks had created mortgages that were *designed* to deceive people. An entire group of bank and mortgage professionals had pledged themselves to falsehoods. They sold mortgages to people that had terms that were extremely unfair and extremely difficult to pay back in full. After it was all over more than 500,000 families lost their homes. Many people lost all of the money they had saved in their entire lives. As usual, a large number of the people who lost their homes and their savings were people of color and people who had lower incomes.

So we have an entire group of people in America who had, as a central part of their work, to swear by something that was a lie. I have hope that at least some of these people have repented of the evil they have done. I have hope that a few of them might have even used the enormous amounts of money they were paid to help some of those who lost their homes. However, according to the psalm, there is a clear boundary between those who have spent most of their lives trying to do the right thing and those who have spent most of their lives not caring about how they have hurt others. Those who have made this sort of deception the center of their lives are not usually among those who who have spent their life seeking the love of God, the truth of God's creation and the justice of God's kingdom.

We were puzzling over these verses during our bible study this past Monday. We were meeting, as usual, at Cafe Kubal during lunch hour. There were five of us at the table. A few participants said that some of these verses brought them a great deal of concern. Let's read part of the psalm together....

*"Who can ascend the hill of the LORD? " *
and who can stand in his holy place?"
"Those who have clean hands and a pure heart, *
who have not pledged themselves to falsehood,
nor sworn by what is a fraud.*

As it happened on Monday, every single person at the table was someone who has devoted a great amount of their life to the church and to seeking God in their lives. Yet one of our members wondered aloud whether their hands were truly clean and whether their heart could be pure. Another worried about this phrase, 'pledging oneself to falsehood'. We talked about the challenges all of us face of devoting too much of our lives to physical comforts and physical goods. We talked about the fact that we are often worried about whether we are doing enough to love others and to help others.

It is important to pay attention to whether or not we are worried and to what we are worrying about. Sometimes worrying is a sign of what is really in our hearts.

26 years ago I had a student in my 6th grade math class named Andrea. Andrea worked steadily through the year. She completed her homework assignments and paid attention during class.

The end of the school year came and the class was preparing for the last big test of the year. I worked with the class for three days reviewing the topics we had studied: long division, fractions, decimals and geometry. At the end of class on Wednesday we finished a few minutes before the bell. It was the beginning of June and many of the students were acting like they were already in the middle of summer vacation.

Not Andrea. Andrea came up to my desk as I prepared a few things for my next class. She said, "Mr. Major, I'm really worried about the big test tomorrow. I want to do my best. What else do you think I should be studying at home tonight?"

I stopped for a few seconds. I looked at Andrea and I looked at the rest of the class. Then I said, "Andrea, turn around." Andrea turned around and looked at the class. Then I asked, "Andrea, what do you see?" She replied, "I see kids talking and fooling around. And Jason just threw a pencil at Amber."

I asked another question, "Andrea, do those kids look like they are worried about the test tomorrow?" She replied, "No." "Andrea," I said, "I think the fact that you are worried means you really don't have to be worried about the math test. You've been preparing all year for this math test. You will do just fine."

I continued, "On the other hand, I'm not sure about all of your classmates. Some of them don't seem to be at all concerned about tomorrow's math test. Maybe a few of them should be a bit more worried about it, and you shouldn't be worried."

The fact that you are worried or concerned about doing the right thing sometimes indicates that you really don't need to be too worried. That fact you aren't really concerned sometimes indicates that you just don't care. In our case we aren't talking about a math test, we are talking about something more important.

In our case we are talking about whether we have been concerned about whether we have been truly doing the work of God's justice, and knowing and living God's truth and loving God's people. You are the generation of those who seek the Lord. You are the generation of people who have spent years, some of you have spent decades seeking the Lord. You are not perfect, but you have been paying attention to doing the work of God's justice and to knowing and living God's truth and to loving God's people.

You are the generation of those who seek the Lord. You are not perfect but you are the people God is working through in this time and in this place. There is no more perfect group of people who are really getting the job done. There is no varsity team waiting on the bench, waiting to take the field. You are the people God has to work with. If you have been a bit worried about trying to act with love and justice, perhaps you don't have to be really worried.

I do not have perfect vision, but I know love when I see it. You are God's people who love. When it is all over the next group of people are going to look back and say, now I understand. These were the people who were seeking the love, the truth and the justice of God.