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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA W32  
12 Pentecost (Proper 14 C) 8:30, 11:00 a.m. Eucharist  
Sunday 7 August 2016

Gen. 15: 1-16  
Ps. 33: 12-22  
Heb. 11:1-3, 8-16  
Lk. 12:32-40

### **The Existentialist and the Christ**

“Do not be afraid little flock, for it is your father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk. 12).

Above my desk I have a photograph. It is a selfie from the days before phones were cameras and before we called them selfies. On this first day of kindergarten my five year old daughter has a proud smile. I’m trying to smile. My lips are bending upward. But you can see a sadness in my eyes, that I do not really have my heart in it.

Lately, I have been trying to prepare myself for the last first day of school before our son leaves for college next year. I am getting ready for that aching feeling of separation as he goes. When we became new parents roughly eighty percent of our friends gave us the same advice. You can probably guess what they said. “Enjoy this time because their childhood will pass incredibly quickly.” And it has.

This advice holds true for everyone. “Life is short, so really live.” We know from experience that we can waste our lives. We choose to be petty, to let little things bother us. We are irritable. We despair and let the newspaper tell us who we are. We hold grudges and complain. We resent others and wonder if we are successful. We live in the past. We worry about the future. We work for the wrong things and in a thousand other ways we refuse to live.

This morning I want to consider two ways of understanding how short life is. The first view comes from the twentieth century existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and the second from Jesus.

1. Sartre’s existentialism grew out of a German philosophical movement called phenomenology. Early philosophers like Rene Descartes (1596-1650) asked how we can really have confidence that what we believe is true. He tried doubting everything and realized he had to begin by trusting our shared rationality. This is what he means in writing, “I think, therefore I am.” Later, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) tried to clarify the boundary between what we can know with confidence and what is beyond our powers of reason.

In contrast to starting with the question of what is true, phenomenologists begin with experience. They try to offer the richest possible description and reflection on how the world shows up for us (to use an expression by Werner Erhard). The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) writes that primarily we notice what is useful to us.

Suppose on a Sunday morning as I am running a little late for church I discover that my bicycle has a flat tire. Although I had not thought of my bike pump all summer, suddenly nothing in the world is more important. This is particularly true if you cannot find the bike pump. Of every object in the world it has the most urgent reality.

Heidegger makes up a whole vocabulary to alienate us from our ordinary perceptions.<sup>1</sup> He does this to point out how experience begins with what is useful to us not with what we define as “the Truth” in the abstract. At some point we realize that we ourselves have usefulness, or are obstructions to other people. To them we are in a sense like the bike pump when we are helpful or “traffic,” when we get in their way.

In contrast with those earlier philosophers, Heidegger also believes that everything is particular, no one is a person “in general.” He writes that we are thrown into a world that always already exists. We always already have an identity, a way that others perceive us. Nothing is value neutral – you are perceived as a person of a certain class and race (even if that is ambiguous), your clothes, your gestures, how you talk and dress communicates something to others.

When existentialists said “existence precedes essence” they are emphasizing the importance of this particularity, that human values and history shape what we notice and who we are. During World War I, a young man famously asked Jean-Paul Sartre if he should care for his invalid mother or join the French resistance. Sartre basically said that the man should decide based on what kind of person he wanted to become. Do you want to be someone who looks after a sick mother or someone who defends France.

Sartre calls this “the burden of freedom.” In choosing, you choose who you will be. You cannot change the historical context but you can in a sense make yourself up as you go along within it. The problem though is that it is not entirely up to us.

Suppose you are at a hotel in Lake Tahoe with your four year old. You walk out the door without your keys and somehow it closes. In the hallway you look through the keyhole at the child and try to figure out what to do. Suddenly you realize that someone sees you looking. At that point you cannot choose who you are. You see yourself the way that they do. To that person you are a peeping tom. Fortunately you can try to explain yourself.<sup>2</sup>

The end of Sartre’s play *No Exit* (1944) contains probably his most misunderstood statement. He writes, “hell is other people.” This is not a way of saying that he hates people. What he means is that after we die we no longer have any control in determining how others perceive us. We become frozen in time unable to explain what we are doing at the keyhole.

For Sartre, life is short the world is strange and often seems to be against us, so we have reason to live in fear of the nothingness. For Sartre, life is short; we are thrown into a world in which our limited freedom is a burden. For Sartre life is short so we must be careful and realize that who we are is mostly what others perceive us to be.

2. Jesus has the simplest response to Sartre’s picture of our existence. He says, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk. 12). This week for homework I want you to write this down and put it somewhere you will see it, like that picture of my daughter and me. Do not forget this, that God longs to give you everything, everything that will free you and give you joy.

Jesus also sees that life is short, but it leads him to a completely different set of conclusions. Often his disciples seem to talk and act as if they had forever. They worry. They devote themselves to things that are not really important, like who is should receive the highest honor. The crowds gathering in Jerusalem, the officials of the Roman Empire, terrify them.

And in dozens of ways Jesus repeats a simple message, "Do not be afraid. You have the kingdom. You do not have to hoard your power, your attention, your love, your energy, your possessions. God is giving you what really matters, so you can be generous." Jesus goes on, "by the way, the place where your treasure is, you know the place where you most want to be – that is actually where you will end up."<sup>3</sup> If material things are what you long for, that will be what you get. But we are spiritual beings and cannot be satisfied by material things.

But when we realize that our life is in God's hands, we dare to desire something so much greater. And we will receive it. Jesus tells the strangest story about servants whose master is away celebrating his own wedding. Some of his servants are so busy with unimportant tasks that they will miss his late night arrival. But for the others, when he comes home so filled with joy, he will seat them at his table. He will put on an apron and serve them the best food on the finest dishes. They will sing together and laugh and in their shared happiness they will remember why they serve their master. We do this still today, right here, singing holy songs around this table.

The point of our life, the whole goal of our existence is to share in the joy of the one who made us. We and all creation were made to rejoice in God's love. Jesus wants us to have an extraordinary life. God wants us to have what really matters.

When things go wrong, when we are suffering, in those times when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Jesus is with us. And we know that ultimately we are going to be all right. Even in the worst moments God does not refrain from blessing us with beauty and love.

Our life can not be measured by our net worth, or our appearance, or our individual style, or the degree to which others respect us, or our success as a parent. Our value is not even equivalent to the amount of good we do in the world. Despite what others think about us and even despite what we think ourselves, we are deeply loved by the one who created us.

The problem is that we need to wake up to what God offers us right now. We have to be alert to receive the joy that is breaking forth all around. So Jesus says in every way he knows how, "be prepared, be ready for God. Pray that when the holy Master appears you will be ready for the party."

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) once described himself as a watchmen always seeking the glory of God. As he lay on his deathbed his good friend asked him, "You seem so near the brink of the dark river that I almost wonder how the opposite shore might appear to you." The dying Thoreau was still conscious of receiving God's gift of life. He replied, "one world at a time."<sup>4</sup>

I have been blessed by the existentialists and have learned a great deal from them. In fact I feel a little sheepish in making these comments about Jean-Paul Sartre since he can no longer defend himself. At the same time, I am convinced that we do not need to be afraid of nothingness or of what will happen to our reputation or when our good works fail.

Enjoy this time because your life will pass incredibly quickly. Life is short so really live. Notice the beauty and love that God is giving you in every moment. It is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> In this case, the pump is ready-to-hand, the rest of the world is present-at-hand. This comes from Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (NY: Harper and Row, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails* (NY: Other Press, 2016), 213-4.

<sup>3</sup> This and the next section is inspired by Brett Younger, "Life Is Short," *Day1*, 7 August 2016.

[http://day1.org/7347-life\\_is\\_short](http://day1.org/7347-life_is_short)

<sup>4</sup> Malcolm Clemens Young, *The Spiritual Journal of Henry David Thoreau* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 8.