

“From Here to Eternity”

A Sermon delivered by Barbara Prose
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK, Sunday, October 23, 2011

Good morning. It's good to be here with you this morning. It's good to be in Tulsa, Oklahoma, even on a foggy day. Some of you know that my husband arrived this week, with two dogs and one cat. Our younger daughter, who had this week off from college, helped him make the trip from Maine. On a cool, crisp, sunshiny day, they drove up into our new front yard in a big truck. Actually, they drove all the way from Maine in a huge truck. A huge truck loaded with all our stuff. Twenty-six years of stuff, to be exact.

Now, you might remember in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, a scene in which a man walks up to Jesus and asks, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” You might also remember, after Jesus reminds the man to obey the Commandments, he tells him to, well, get rid of all his stuff! The conversation goes pretty much like this: after the man falls on his knees to ask, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus says, “one thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in Heaven; and come, follow Me.” I'm glad Jesus wasn't in my front yard the last couple of days. Now, the easiest way to understand Jesus' words is to remind ourselves of what we already know: you can't take it with you. Whatever eternal life might be, if it comes *after* death, that truckload of stuff isn't coming with me. We don't see hearses pulling U-Hauls or car trailers behind them. We're not Egyptian pharaohs. What wealth we have managed to accumulate will be left behind.

But Jesus says a few other things about eternal life, for example, “In my Father's house are many mansions,” (sounds like room for lots of stuff) [John 14] or “The Kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed,” or “The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast, mixed in with flour.” [MT.13]. Now, there might be mustard growing in Heaven. And I'd be very happy if someone is baking fresh bread for me in a mansion in Heaven, but what seems most significant about seeds and yeast is that they are both very small, seemingly insignificant, things that have huge, life-giving impact.

The rich man's question, “What *shall* I do to *inherit* eternal life?” is all about the future. But Jesus seems to want the man to take action now. Don't worry about what

you'll inherit; don't wait until death is staring you down. You can choose Heaven now. He might even have used the words in the song we just heard, True Colors. He might have said to the wealthy man, "Have you thought about what *your* true colors are?" Which is a similar question to the one the Lord of Death assigns to Nachiketa, when he grants him his third and final blessing. This Sunday, we come to the end of our three-part sermon series on death, a series inspired by the story of Nachiketa. Throughout the month of October, I've wondered – and maybe you have too – what three blessings I would ask for, if I were facing death.

Each of us probably has a different face or name for death, because we've each experienced it differently. For some of us, death's name is cancer. For others it's Alzheimer's. It might be congestive heart failure, or depression. Whatever Nachiketa saw, I've decided his three requests make a lot of sense. First, he asked for the blessing of forgiveness – for himself and all he had touched. He knew he would not be able to continue on with his life until he had forgiven his father and made peace with his past. Second, he asked for the blessing of inner fire – he knew that he wouldn't be able to face the future without passion, strength, and courage. And last but not least, he asked for "that which is eternal."

Three things. Forgiveness, in order to face the past without flinching; inner fire, in order to face the future without flinching; and an understanding of the eternal, in order to face the present . . . you got it . . . without flinching. An understanding of the eternal to free him from feeling trapped in time. Doesn't that sound good? There are so many ways we get trapped in time. You might be out of work or retired, and have too much time to do nothing. Or you might be overworking and overstressed, and never have enough time to get things done. Now more than ever, we are a people obsessed with time. With my smartphone, I know not only what time it is in Tulsa, but what time it is in Timbuktu and in Tibet. But if I asked you, right now, "Do *you* have *enough* time?" few of you would raise your hands.

When Dr. Rechtschaffen, author of *Timeshifting: How to Control the Speed of Time*, asks the same question at Fortune 100 gatherings – "Do you have enough time?" – not one of the thousands of people present has ever raised a hand. Part of the problem with time is that we never *really* have it, we only borrow it – from eternity, you

could say. We all live on borrowed time. Our anxieties about death and life are reflected in the words we use about time. We pass time, save time, spend time, say time is money, kill time, track time, mark time, and split seconds. We tell each other, "This is the time of your life." And time waits for no one. Time flies. Sixteen hundred years ago, St. Augustine pondered the mystery of time and wrote, "I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me, but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled." An awareness of death, an awareness we've been cultivating as a community during the month of October, opens up a new door on time.

Here's what I mean. A few years ago my mother almost died. She wasn't feeling well for days, and although she hates going to the doctor, she felt so . . . *wrong* . . . she went in. The doctor did some tests, found nothing conclusive, and sent her home. But she continued not to feel well. My mom lives alone, and close to a hospital, so after a few more days of not feeling well, with no helpful information coming in from any of the tests, she walked herself down the street and into the hospital lobby. Then she collapsed on the hospital floor. She spent the next few days on the seventh floor of the hospital, with such an intense pain in her head she said she felt like throwing herself out the window. Luckily the windows didn't open. Her fever was high enough to kill her and I wondered aloud on the phone with my sister if I should fly to France.

After several days on antibiotics, her fever broke. My brother, sister, and I were ecstatic. My mother awoke with a new awareness. This is how she put it to us: "I knew in that moment that *It*, whatever *It* is, owed me nothing, but that I on the other hand, owed *It* everything." It's when my mother's time seemed to be up, when it felt to her that she might die, that another feeling opened up for her, a feeling of reality beyond time. Schleiermacher, who's been called the Father of Modern Theology, writes about this basic feeling for the infinite that my mother experienced in his book, *On Religion*:

"Observe yourself with unceasing effort," he says. "Detach all that is not yourself, always proceed with ever-sharper sense, and the more you fade from yourself, the clearer will the universe stand forth before you . . . (who are you really?) . . . and the more splendidly will you be recompensed for the horror of self-annihilation through the feeling of the infinite." [Friedrich Schleiermacher].

In some mysterious way, my mother was given the gift of a feeling for the infinite when she faced death. She called that something “*It*.” Some of you would call it God. Others, the Universe. There was nothing for her to inherit or to wait for. She’d already received the greatest gift and had been redeeming that gift all along, simply by living her life as best she could.

So with my mother’s story in mind, let’s return to Nachiketa for a minute. Now the Lord of Death, Lord Yama, has a pretty clear job description; just like cancer, and Alzheimer’s, and heart disease. So when Nachiketa asked for the eternal, the Lord of Death tried to talk him out of this request. Actually, the Lord of Death was somewhat surprised – after all, Nachiketa was a young man. Surely he wanted more . . . stuff. Not wanting to be so easily defeated, Lord Yama reminded him this was his third and *last* blessing, and that he could choose *anything*.

He mentioned other choices: a harem of beautiful maidens to travel with, a royal golden war chariot with the world’s fastest horses, a golden palace where Nachiketa would be king. 21st Century equivalents of these blessings might include the winning ticket to the next \$10 million dollar lottery, a faithful and loving life partner with whom to create a supportive family, a job as CEO of the next big Silicon Valley Success Story, discovering a hidden oil field the size of Glenn Pool. Very tempting: loyal companions, possessions, wealth, and power. Nachiketa hesitated, and considered the Lord of Death’s offers. Then he asked, “Won’t all these things – companions, possessions, wealth, power – won’t they return in the end to your own kingdom?” Slowly, Lord Yama nodded. “Then I ask for that which is eternal.”

Finally defeated, the Lord of Death gave Nachiketa . . . a simple mirror. Now, when I look in the mirror, the first thing I see is the exact opposite of the eternal. Despite my faithful, nightly applications of Oil of Olay’s age-defying, intensive, nourishing night cream, my trying to get enough sleep, taking lots of walks, and drinking lots of water, when I look in the mirror I see wrinkles, sagging skin, and age spots. Real reflections and certain signs of my own mortality. Still, if I linger there and contemplate my own mortality, time stops, or becomes nothing more than an idea, and I see myself as a child, as a young woman, as a much older woman, and as I am now. All at once. All at

the same time. And I feel something inside me that hasn't changed since I was a girl, and that I suspect will never change as long as I live.

I've heard friends say, "I knew I was older because of how people in gas stations and in grocery stores have started treating me, but inside, I felt just the same as I always have." The heart of the problem with Heaven and eternal life is that anything, *really anything* – a really good day, or a really bad day – *lasting forever*, would be hell. We say, "I wish this day would last forever," when things all seem to be lining up in our favor, but if it really happened, if you got stuck in that day forever, I don't think you'd like it. You'd want vacation to end, so you could go home. You'd want to stop eating ice cream so you could have a bite of pizza. You'd want to get off the cruise ship so you could walk on dry land. You'd want the perfect weekend to end so you could get back to work. Thank heavens nothing lasts forever, then. Not Hell, *and* not Heaven. Remember the movie *Groundhog Day*? That's exactly what happened to Bill Murray. He was stuck as his miserable, sexist self, in a hotel room in Puxatawney, Pennsylvania, until he gave up on himself and learned to appreciate the gift of the present moment. He was literally trapped in time, until he learned to accept each and every day, any day – *any day* – as a gift.

Every day, Heaven and Hell are possibilities. Here's another example: before I came to Tulsa, I did my ministerial internship in Carmel, California. There are several military bases and military training schools around Carmel. Places like the Defense Language Institute and the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School. So there were military families in the church, and I had the pleasure of getting to know several of these parents and their children. Kerri-Leigh's husband was deployed to Afghanistan in 2008. One way of dealing with the terrible loneliness and fear was to connect with other "milsouses," (a new word for me,) online. Each day they would write and share their feelings, their daily troubles and triumphs.

One morning, a milspouse posted something with this heading: "Yesterday I Thought You Were Dead." In her post, she described seeing police cruisers driving up and down her street, and feeling paranoid all day. She called a friend, trying to change her frame of mind. And as they laughed about her nervousness, a cruiser slowed down in front of her house, stopped, and she heard the doorbell ring. "I don't remember

much,” she wrote, “except that it took a million years to get to the door.” Through the side window, she saw someone’s arm clutching a sheaf of papers. When she opened the door, she saw men in Class A uniforms. There was a chaplain. She whispered, “No, no, no . . . no.” Then – they called her by the wrong name. Time stopped, and very slowly she realized, and the officers realized, they had the wrong house. This milspouse didn’t describe her next conversation, exchange, or meeting with her husband, but you and I can imagine that it was filled with new and renewed expressions of love.

Theologian Paul Tillich writes, “The riddle of the present is the deepest of all the riddles of time. For the mystery of the future and the mystery of the past are united in the mystery of the present.” The present, where we touch the eternal, is all about impermanence. What is now is always slipping into the future. What is now is always becoming a memory of the past.

There’s an old Buddhist story about a big, tough samurai going to see a little Zen monk. The samurai arrives at the temple, and accustomed as he is to getting his way, says, “Monk, teach me about heaven and hell!” the monk looked up at this mighty warrior and replied with utter disdain, “Teach you about heaven and hell? I couldn’t teach you anything! You’re dirty. Your sword is rusty. You’re a disgrace, an embarrassment to the samurai class. Leave immediately! I can’t stand the sight of you.” The samurai was furious. He grew red in the face, shook all over, and was speechless with rage. He pulled out his sword and raised it above him, preparing to murder the monk. “That is hell,” said the monk. The samurai was overwhelmed by the compassion and surrender of this little man, who had risked his life to give this teaching. Slowly, he put down his sword, filled with gratitude, and suddenly peaceful. “And that,” said the monk softly, “is heaven.”

Next time you look in the mirror – or maybe every time you do, for then there’ll be more opportunities to create heaven on earth – ask yourself, “Who am I really? What are my true colors? What is my essence?” We live in a culture obsessed not just with time, but with mirrors, with how we look, how much we have, how much we know. Resist the temptation to ask, “Who do I wish I was more like? Or what am I missing?” Take a moment – a lot can happen in a moment – to reflect on all the stuff you carry

with you, literally and metaphorically, and remember Jesus' advice. Give it away. Follow me. Live now.

We look for reflections of ourselves all around us. And we compare ourselves to others and aspire to be like them. Sometimes it works, and other times it trips us up. The Lord of Death reminds us to look deeper, into *ourselves*, to show our true colors, to find the eternal. I've looked and decided I'm okay with all my boxes of stuff; I'll go home later and do some more unpacking. My grandmother's dresses, the baby clothes my mother knitted, the clay cup Celeste made in second grade, and Sophia's certificate for being the best fiddler at the highland Games; those are all little, tangible pieces of love that I think Jesus wouldn't mind me keeping, as long as they help me remember that as long as I live in love, I'm living in Heaven already. There are so many things over which I have no power. But, like a mustard seed and yeast, the smallest things, actions which only take a moment, are the very things that last an eternity.

So, today, say "I love you." Make someone laugh. Exchange a smile. Welcome a stranger. This is the work of our community: to make more mistakes, climb more mountains, eat more ice cream. To go out in the rain without an umbrella. Watch more sunrises, and play with more children. Moment by moment, we touch the eternal. Moment by moment, we express the infinite in the finite. We let go again and again, and live again in love.

May it be so for each and every one of us, now and forevermore. Amen.